STATO MAGGIORE DELL'ESERCITO
UFFICIO STORICO

MARIO MONTANARI

THE THREE BATTLES OF EL ALAMEIN

(June - November 1942)

PARTE PRIMA

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© Stato Maggiore Esercito - Ufficio Storico - Roma 2007

ISBN 88-87940-79-7

Printed in Italy

Translated by Dominique Doré for Skill Training s.r.l. - Rome.
The English edition of this book has been proofread and revised
by Prof. Pasquale Esposito for the Italian Army Language School.

Acknowledgements

A very special thanks goes to the staff of Italian Army Language School.

FOREWORD

This monograph focuses on the military events which took place in the western Egyptian desert in the summer and fall of 1942.

It is an abridged edition of the third volume entitled *El Alamein (January-November 1942)* of the work *Operations in North Africa* written by General Montanari and published by the Historical Office of the Army General Staff.

As its title suggests, this monograph deals with the culminating moments of the fighting conducted overseas by the Italo-German troops against those of the British Commonwealth. On the one side, there was Rommel, by then a legend, and on the other, Auchinleck and Montgomery.

Victory seemed at hand for a short while, but it soon became evident that daring and boldness alone could not enable the Axis to overcome the difficulties and obstacles hindering operations, due to insufficient logistics.

In the late Spring of 1942, the issue of choosing between Malta and Tobruk as a stronghold was settled in favour of the latter, although this decision was not unanimously agreed upon.

In July, all expectations were shattered by the events in the bottleneck of El Alamein and cancelling Operation C3 was bitterly regretted in the following evaluations of the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean theatre, triggering many debates and harsh criticism.

Apart from all controversies and hindsight judgement(s), which were groundless and therefore useless, the events in El Alamein on the African front and in Stalingrad on the eastern front marked a watershed in the conflict, when the strategic initiative of the Axis was stopped and the advance of the Allies gained momentum.

This very detailed study by General Montanari, whom the Historical Office wishes to thank, is mainly based on the official documents of the erstwhile enemies and also takes into account the reports and memories of those who took part in the events at all levels.

It is superfluous to highlight the importance of the battle of El Alamein whose events and strategic repercussions are well-known. We lost, but we lost honourably and, as the author pointed out, should be proud of it.

CONVENTIONAL SYMBOLS

used in the sketches and maps

Conventional symbols were employed by the Italian Army and are still in use today. They are as follows:

1. *Basic symbols:*

Unit	
Headquarters	
Logistic or Administrative Installation	
Logistic Headquarters	

2. *Role indicators:*

Infantry	
Bersaglieri	
Armoured Troops	
Cavalry	
Artillery	
Engineer Corps	
Motorized Troops	

3. *Size indicators:*

Army	XXXX
Army Corps	XXX
Division	XX
Brigade	X
Regiment/Group	III
Battalion	II
Company	I

To indicate a tactical group the symbol is used above the size indicator.

4. *Unit indicators:*
The number corresponding to the size indicator represented is put to the right of the unit symbol in which the division in question is framed.

E.g. 2 5 indicates the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Infantry Regiment

5. *Nationality indicators:*
Where necessary, the following initials are used to the right of the base symbol: IT: Italy; GE: Germany; UK: Great Britain; AU: Australia; NZ: New Zealand; FR: France; PO: Poland.

INITIALS

AIT	Italo-German Army
ACIT	Italo-German Armoured Army
CTA	German Corps of Africa
DAK	*Deutsches Afrikakorps*
Delease	Supreme Command Delegation in North Africa
DSCS	Historical Diary of the Supreme Command
DSCSAS	Historical Diary of the High Command North Africa
OBS	*Oberbefehlshaber Sud*
OKH	*Oberkommando des Heeres*
OKW	*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*
SKL	*Seekriegsleitung*
SMRE	Royal Army General Staff
USSMA	Historical Office of the General Staff of the Air Force
USSME	Historical Office of the General Staff of the Army
USSMM	Historical Office of the General Staff of the Navy

INTRODUCTION

In every campaign there is the moment of the great decision, which reveals itself or will reveal itself as determining. For the 1942 campaign in Northern Africa that moment occurred in the spring when Admiral Raeder, Commander in Chief of the *Kriegsmarine*, was finally able to persuade Hitler to accept full German participation in the occupation of Malta.

General Cavallero, Chief of the General Staff, backed by the Chiefs of the General Staff of the Italian Navy and the Italian Air Force, Admiral Riccardi and General Fougier, was persistent in these regards for some time without ever being able to win over the Führer's poor inclination to embark on what he considered a difficult and unnecessary undertaking. Finally, Raeder overcame and openly declared that victory in the Mediterranean depended on two elements: naval power and air-land-sea cooperation. In essence, the strategy to follow in the Mediterranean theatre had to coordinate three factors: naval power as a guarantee for supplies, supplies as a guarantee for bases, bases as a guarantee for naval power. The central point was Malta. Marshal Kesselring, *Oberbefehlshaber*, and Admiral Weichold, representative of the *Seekskriegsleitung* attached to the General Staff of the Italian Navy, moved in support to Admiral Raeder: taking Malta was necessary.

Fate would have it that the occupation of the island - Operation C3 for the Supreme Command and *Hercules* for the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* - once having reached maturation, would be confronted with the new and nearly unexpected exploit of General Rommel in Libya.

He moved on the 21st of January from positions in Marsa el-Brega with Italo-German Armoured Corps (*Panzerarmee Afrika*), and in fifteen days he arrived at the Ain el-Gazala line surprising and disorienting the 8th British Army thanks to the rapidity and determination of his advance. He stopped there to rearrange and complete his forces, but he soon began, with greater and greater conviction, to cherish the idea of taking the initiative, forestalling the enemy. In short, he intended to defeat the 8th British Army in Marmarica, taking Tobruk and pushing the rest of the enemy back beyond the border.

It seems appropriate, in retrospect, to point out Rommel's profound and absolutely exact evaluation: he could never have hoped to have material superiority over his enemy, as long as they did not scatter their forces as had happened twice in Cirenaica. As a consequence, a relationship of acceptable inferiority was enough for him. He would know how to compensate for the disadvantages and weigh the scales to his side thanks to

greater manoeuvrability, the superiority of some fundamental German armour, (Panzer MkIII type J special with a long-barrelled 50 mm. cannon, Mk IV with a 75 mm. assault gun, 50 and 88 mm. anti-tank pieces as well as 76 mm. from Soviet war spoils, *Stukas* and Me.109 fighters) the excellent organization of the *Panzerarmee* and the fighting capacity of the German troops. Furthermore, the British command would help him, he thought, by not being able to concentrate armoured forces in the right point and at the necessary moment.

But this is not sufficient for illustrating Rommel's operational thinking. There was a second fixed point: time was on the side of the English. Any blow they suffered that permitted them to breathe would enable them to recover the men, supplies and ships which they were not lacking in, especially with the entrance of the United States on the battlefield and the Wehrmacht's weighty commitment in Russia.

Two concepts were derived from this: firstly, the complete implementation of the operational mechanism in all of its parts was a luxury, it would be necessary to give up "the best" and be satisfied with "good". Secondly, winning was not enough, it was necessary to destroy. Caution in operations in those circumstances and in that theatre was destined to fail. Essentially, all hopes for victory were tied to a constant acceptance of calculated risk.

On the 30th of April in Berchtesgaden, Marshal Keitel, head of the OKW, Marshal Kesselring and General Cavallero were present at a meeting between Hitler and Mussolini where the dilemma was concretely faced: Malta or Tobruk? Considering that preparations were not far enough along for the first and given that Rommel projected that they could take Tobruk in a couple of weeks, it was agreed to give precedence to the latter operation with the limited objective of taking the stronghold and reaching the Egyptian border. Malta was postponed to mid-July.

Cavallero went back to Libya on 5 May. In order to leave no doubts, he made his thoughts clear to General Bastico, High Commander of the armed forces in North Africa: the planned offensive, which proposed to destroy or wear down General Ritchie's 8th British Army, take the enemy out of the port of Tobruk and reach the Sollum-Halfaya line, was useful both as a defensive position and as a departure base for further offensives, but he had to absolutely abstain from provoking deep wear on the Italo-German Army, as this would compromise the laborious work of reconstructing and strengthening the Italian divisions. Consequently, they needed to avoid getting entangled in a weighty investment in Tobruk, or worse yet, letting themselves be dragged into the twofold dangerous and onerous commitment of besieging the stronghold on one side and having to face the armoured forces to the east.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE PANZERARMEE AFRIKA*
dated 26 May 1942
Headquarters of the *Panzerarmee Afrika* (General E. Rommel)

X Army Corps (General B. Gioda) over:
Brescia Infantry Division (General Lombardi)
Pavia Infantry Division (General G. De Stefanis)
Corps Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units

XX Army Corps (General E. Baldassare) over:
Trieste Motorized Division (General A. Azzi)
Ariete Armoured Division (General De Stefanis)
Corps Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units

XXI Army Corps (General E. Navarini) over:
Trento Infantry Division (General C. Gotti)
Sabratha Infantry Division (General M. Soldarelli)
15th Schützen Brigade (Colonel Menny)
Corps Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units

Deutsches Afrika Korps (General Nehring):
15th Armoured Division (General von Vaerst)
21st Armoured Division (General von Bismarck)
90th Light Division (less 15th B.) (General U. Kleemann)

Artillery 104 Headquarters

Italian Artillery Headquarters (General Nicolini)

Hecker Combat Group

Army Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units

* Both the new rank attributed to the whole of Rommel's forces and his new title, *Oberbefehlshaber* (commander-in-chief), were decided by Hitler who intended in this way to give prominence to the German presence in Africa. The title could have conferred greater authority to Rommel, but only if explicitly linked to a sector, which never was or could be. Thus Rommel continued to depend operationally on General Bastico, high commander in North Africa, and, in some ways, on Kesselring, high commander for the South. The Army Headquarters was called *Panzerarmee Oberkommando* (PzAOK).

Therefore, the directives delivered to General Bastico to be instructed to Rommel, precisely defined the aim and limits of the offensive:

"1. Objective: defeat the adversaries' mobile forces deployed to the east of Tobruk. In the case of a favourable result, launch a hasty attack against Tobruk.

The taking of Tobruk is a categorical condition for the forward movement of our positions. Upon verifying such a condition, the frontline will be brought to Sollum-Halfaya- Sidi Omar, which the bulk of armoured forces should not go beyond. In case the occupation of Tobruk is not successful, the formation assumed after the battle should not go beyond the Ain el-Gazala line..."

The battle of Ain el-Gazala began on 26 May. It was concluded triumphantly on 21 June, after having overcome a tremendous moment of crisis provoked, at the end of May, by certain incongruencies that had emerged in the supposed enemy positions. For three or four days, every hope of rapid victory disappeared, the shortage of supplies following the enveloping force and the logistic difficulties together with the amassing of British armoured units caused fear for the worst.

At 9am on 21 June Rommel received General Klopper, commander of Tobruk's garrison and accepted his surrender. The fall of the stronghold cost the 8th Army dearly: approximately 35,000 prisoners, 2,000 vehicles and 30 efficient tanks, 5,000 tons of food and about 2,000 of petrol, enormous amounts of supplies and other war materials. Rommel's order of the day was proud, bold and... meaningful:

> "Soldiers!
> The great battle of Marmarica has been crowned with the occupation of Tobruk...
>
> Now it's time to completely annihilate the enemy. We will not stop until we have destroyed every last part of the 8th British Army. I will ask you again for great effort in order to reach our goal in the days to come."

The following day, Rommel found out by radio that Hitler had awarded him the Field Marshal's baton.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE 8TH BRITISH ARMY
dated 26 May 1942

Headquarters of the 8th Army (General N.M. Ritchie):

13th Armoured Corps (General W.H. Gott) over:
- 50th British Infantry Division (General W.H. Ramsden):
- 69th Infantry Brigade (Brigadier L.L. Hassel)
- 150th Infantry Brigade (Brigadier C.W. Haydon)
- 151st Infantry Brigade (Brigadier J.S. Nichols)

1st South African Infantry Division (General D.H. Pienaar):
- 1st Infantry Brigade (Brigadier J.P. Furstenburg)
- 2nd Infantry Brigade (Brigadier W.H.E. Poole)
- 3rd Infantry Brigade (Brigadier R.J. Palmer)

2nd South African Infantry Division (General D. Klopper)
- 4th Infantry Brigade (Brigadier A.A. Hayton)
- 6th Infantry Brigade (Brigadier F.W. Cooper)
- 9th Indian Infantry Brigade (General B.C. Fletcher)

1st Tank Brigade (General W.O.L.O'Carroll)

32nd Tank Brigade (General A.L. Willison)

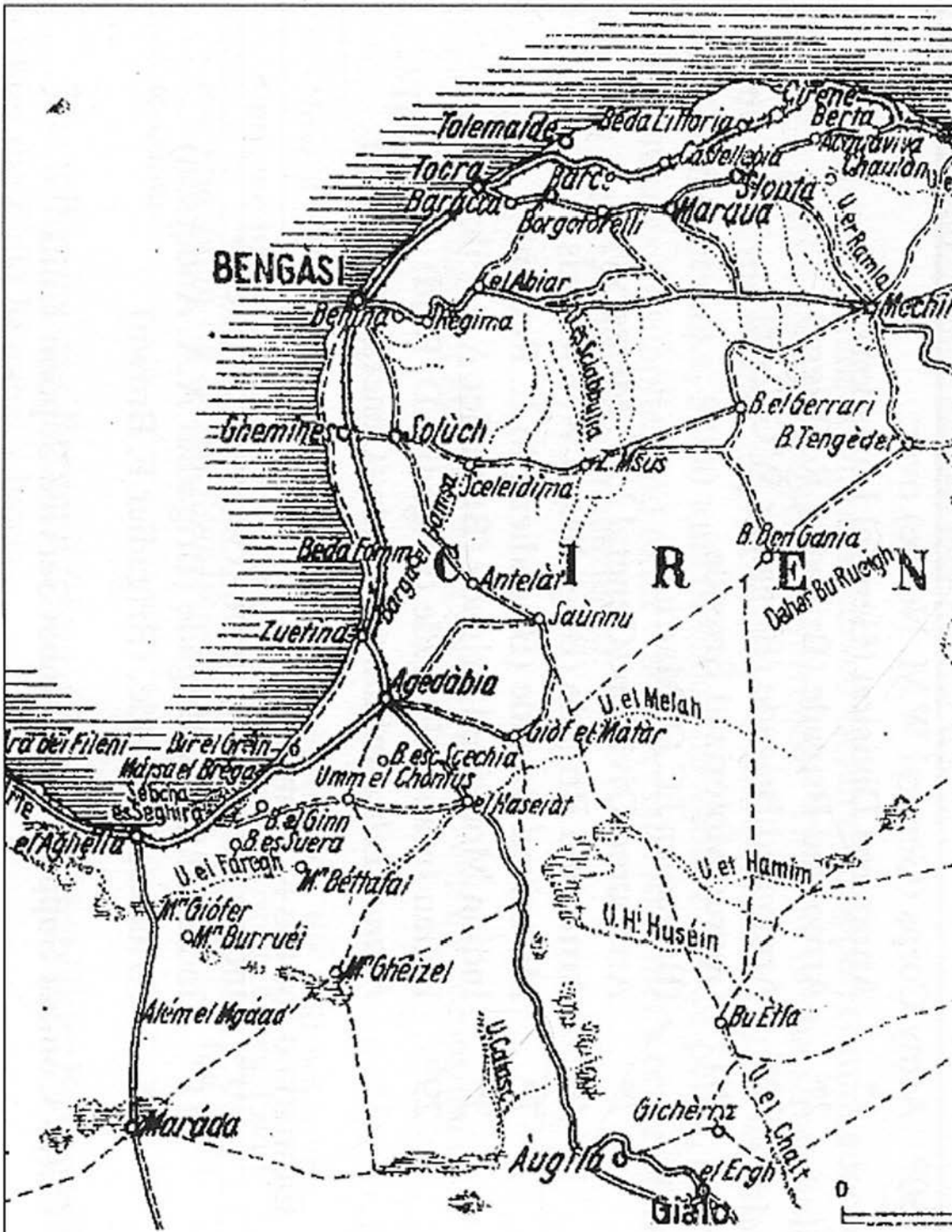
Corps Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units

30th Army Corps (General W.M. Norrie) over:
- 1st Armoured Division (General Lumsden):
- 2nd Armoured Brigade (Brigadier R. Briggs)
- 22nd Armoured Brigade (Brigadier W.G.Carr)
- 201st Guards Motorized Brigade (Brigadier J.C.O. Marriott)
- 7th Armoured Division (General F.W. Messervy)
- 4th Armoured Brigade (Brigadier G.W. Richards)
- 7th Motorized Brigade (Brigadier J.M.L. Renton)
- 3rd Indian Motorized Brigade (Brigadier A.E. Filose)
- 29th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier D. Reid)
- 1st *France Libre* Infantry Brigade (General P. Koenig)

Earmarked for the 8th Army:
- 10th Indian Infantry Division (General T.W. Rees)
- 11th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier A.A. Anderson)
- 1st Armoured Brigade, (Brigadier F. Brown)

Corps Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units

MAP OF CI



Tolemaide
Beda Littoria
Cirene
Berta
Tocra
Barce
Barcca
Borgofofelli
Marqua
Slonta
U. er Ramla
BENGÀSI
el Abiar
Benina
Regima
Mechi
B. el Gerrari
B. Tengèder
Ghemines
Solùch
Sceleidima
Beda Fomm
Antelàt
Saùnnu
B. Ben Gania
Dahar Bu Rueigh
C I R E N
Zuetina
Agedàbia
U. el Melah
Giòf el Màtar
Bir el Grein
Mársa el Brega
B. esc Scechia
Umm el Chontus
el Haseiàt
B. el Ginn
B. es Suera
el Aghella
U. el Faregh
Mr. Béttafal
U. et Hamim
Mr. Giófer
Mr. Burruéi
U. Hi Huséin
Mr. Gheizel
Além el Mgaad
Bu Etta
U. Calasc
U. el Chalt
Gichèrnz
Maráda
Àugila
el Ergh
Giàlo
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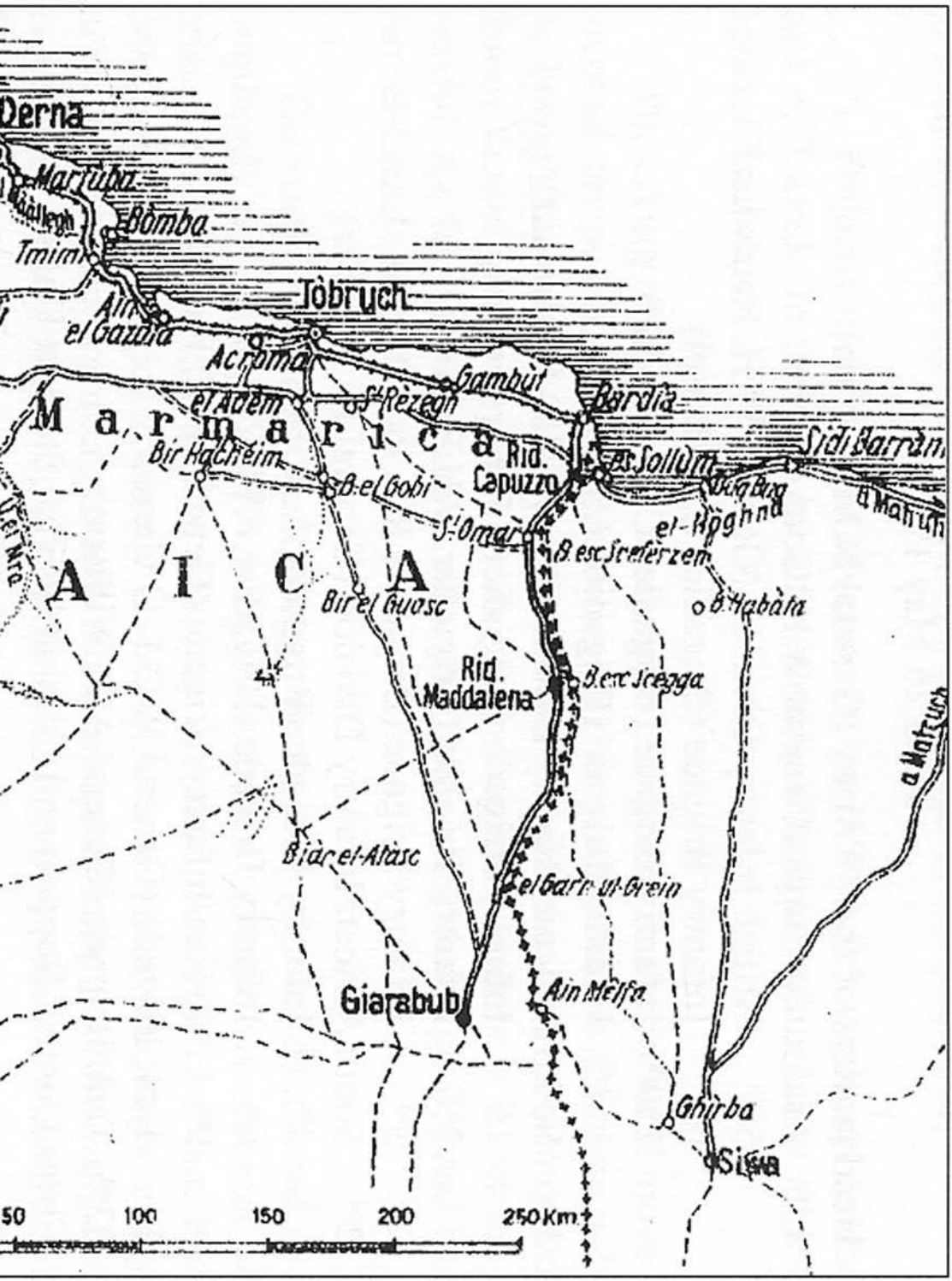

Derna
Martuba
Bòmba
Tmimi
Tòbruch
Ain el Gazala
Acroma
Gambùt
Bardia
el Adem
St Rezegh
M a r m a r i c a
Bir Hacheim
B. el Gobi
Rid. Capuzzo
es Sollum
Sidi Barrani
Bug Bug
el-Hoghna
a Matruh
St Omar
B. esc Sceferzem
A I C A
Bir el Guasc
B. Habàta
Rid. Maddalena
B. esc Scegga
a Matruch
Biar el-Atàsc
el Garn ul-Grein
Giarabub
Ain Melfa
Ghirba
Siwa
50
100
150
200
250 Km

Chapter one

EXPLOITING SUCCESS

1. The Operational Dilemma

Were an example necessary for how to press time and favourable events, you would need to take a sample of the morning of 21 June. At 8:30, just after hearing Klopper's offer to surrender, Rommel ordered most of the *Trieste* Motorized Division to transfer immediately to the Sidi Rezegh area, front east-southeast. At 9:45 he issued a message to all subordinate headquarters: *"The Tobruk stronghold has capitulated. All units rally and prepare for further advance"*. At noon he arranged for the 21st *Panzer* Division to urgently go to Gambut, on the Balbia Way east of Tobruk, and that at dawn on the 23rd the XX Corps should be gathered at Sidi Rezegh. The XXI would be concentrated on the Balbia Way west of Tobruk; ready to take up the movement of the XX Corps, which would bring along the *Brescia* Infantry Division and the 9th *Bersaglieri* Regiment to Gambut, leaving the *Pavia* Infantry Division around El Adem.

In the afternoon the corps commanders were summoned to the city to report. The new orders concerned the annihilation of enemy troops detached on the border. Then the XXI Armoured Corps needed to reach Bardia rapidly, in any case by 23rd, and the X to deploy west of Capuzzo redoubt, in order to disengage the 90th Light Division, which was earmarked to act in the Sidi Omar area protected on the right by the armoured corps. The XX remained in the Sidi Rezegh area for the moment and the DAK had to group at Gasr el Aridon, along the Trigh Capuzzo. The enveloping movement on Sidi Omar was entrusted to both and the continuation of the manoeuvre towards the Sollum and Sidi el Barrani coasts assured the elimination of every residual adversarial resistance. The *San Marco* Battalion and the II/40th Infantry Regiment remained to preside over Tobruk and the II/19th Infantry Regiment over el-Adem.

At this point it is necessary to examine the involvement at the highest levels. In that same afternoon of 21 June, Field Marshal Kesselring flew in from Sicily. He was the first high-ranking personality to come to Tobruk after the victory and the meeting. According to Major von Mellenthin, (Chief of the Intelligence Branch of the Panzerarmee) who had also attended the meeting, the talk soon became quite lively. For Kesselring it was a given that, as the OKW and the Italian Supreme Command had

decided, now was the time for Operation *Hercules*, more so since Malta showed signs of revival after the tremendous aerial incursions it had suffered. Rommel had completely different ideas; now was the time to exploit their success without waiting for the strike against Malta. When confronted by the firmness of will of the person to whom he was speaking in wanting the established strategic plan for the occupation of the island to be respected, and therefore to postpone the invasion of Egypt (impossible without full aerial support), he faltered. He admitted that the *Panzerarmee* had suffered heavy losses during the whole battle, yet in his opinion the 8th was worse off and they could not let such a singular opportunity to penetrate deeply into Egypt pass. Deep enough to reach... the Suez canal. Even a few weeks' delay would concede the time necessary for the enemy to recover and prevent reaching such a goal. The meeting closed with each maintaining their own opinion. Kesselring clearly stated his intention to take the reinforcements given to Von Waldau for the offensive back to Sicily. Rommel stiffened and appealed to Berlin that very night[1].

The news of the fall of Tobruk first reached Rome, then, hot on its heels, the communication about Bastico's operational direction: *"...attain conquest of Sollum- Halfaya- Sidi Omar line, as directives from the Supreme Command 30760 dated 5 May"*[2]. Cavallero's answer was immediate: Mussolini was pleased with the respect for the 5 May directives and, while pointing out the necessity for the army's *"arrangement"* on the Sollum Halfaya front to take place promptly, he arranged for the airforce units tasked for the operation against Malta, or better yet C3, according to the conventional Italian name, to be freed urgently. *"Communicate this to Marshal Kesselring on behalf of the Duce"*, Cavallero specified. Finally he called attention back to the opportunity to retake Giarabub[3]. It should be said immediately that in reality Mussolini was more than inclined not to stop at the border: *"The Duce is in good spirits and intends to go to Africa"*, Galeazzo Ciano (the Italian Foreign Minister) wrote in his diary on the 22nd, *"In truth he was a supporter of the decisive attack, even against the opinion of the Supreme Command. Now he fears they don't*

[1] The narration of von Mellenthin follows as reported. (*Panzer Battles,* Cassel, London 1955) However, Kesselring gave a different version. Not only does he set the encounter in the morning of the 22nd, but he does not say anything about the conflicting views, *"(...) I found him giving orders for the advance on Sidi el Barrani, set for noon of the same day. This plan corresponded to my concepts and did not compromise the attack against Malta" (Memorie di Guerra*, Milan, Garzanti, 1954, p. 126).

[2] DSCSAS, Telegram 01/11932 dated 21/6/1942, 11:45 hours.

[3] DSCS, Telegram 31249 dated 21/6/1942, 21:00 hours.

know how or don't dare to exploit the success thoroughly. He only has faith in Rommel: a sedative telegram has already left Rome saying that it is not a suitable time to push beyond the Fort Capuzzo Sollum line". Nevertheless, for the sake of objectivity, it should be said that for Cavallero it was not a question of rigidity of position, but rather a serious and well-founded worry about the scarce availability of fuel and the transport crisis overseas.

As it has been noted, the Supreme Command saw the situation as dominated by two nightmares; diesel oil and supplies to Libya. On the 19th, at the meeting about transports, when General Weininger pointed out a British convoy made up of ten steamships and a tanker escorted by two cruisers and four destroyers that were presumably directed to Malta, Admiral Sansonetti, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Navy, objected disconsolately: *"As far as the Navy is concerned, we would only be able to employ submarines against this convoy because our ships are completely on empty"*. And General Santoro, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force, observed that the IT Royal Air Force only had seven torpedoes for torpedo bombers[4]. With this impression of the state of things, on 20 June Cavallero submitted a letter for Hitler to Mussolini's endorsement in which, after premising a happy ending to the air-naval battle in mid-June and the predictable imminent success at Marmarica, he reminded him in clear and precise terms of the necessity for carrying out the planned Operation *Hercules*, which should no longer be postponed:

> "(...) This action on Malta is more necessary than ever. The truly remarkable results of the massive air actions undertaken by the Axis aviation and principally by the 2nd *Luftflotte* in April have prolonged their efficiency during the month of May; but at this point, in June, Malta, constantly supplied by planes, has revived its air offensive capacity so that now our navigation to Libya has been newly rendered very difficult. Now, in order to maintain the results achieved in Marmarica and provide for future needs it is necessary to be able to carry out the necessary transports with sufficient security. Diesel fuel is at the foundation of these needs (...).
>
> Our warships now have their diesel stores empty and it is no longer possible to supply them; a second outlay of our naval forces is not now possible and therefore we would only be able to oppose a second attempt at

[4] From the minutes of the meeting of 19 June. (USSME, *Verbali delle riunioni del Capo di Stato Maggiore*, Rome, 1985, III, p. 613) As far as the British convoy was concerned, it was a false alarm.

supplying Malta by adding limited submarine attacks to the ones, then only with weather conditions permitting, carried out with torpedo bombers (...)".

The calculation of diesel requirements indicated that 40,000 tons were necessary to undertake the action against Malta which had to be delivered to Italy at least a week before the end of July, plus another 30,000 tons as a reserve for the IT Royal Navy.

"I also need to add", the letter continued, " that August is the last time of the year that will permit carrying out an operation against Malta, after which it would be necessary to wait for the summer of 1943, with consequences that, you, Führer, are perfectly aware of.
The occupation of Malta, beyond solving the problem of traffic in the Mediterranean, (Libya-Egypt) would give us back the full availability of our air forces that are currently tied up in the Mediterranean sector and will remain so as long as Malta stays in the hands of the enemy. The release of the air forces, totalled with the advantages of taking Malta, would mean a reacquisition of our freedom of manoeuvrability, an essentially important factor for victory (...)"[5].

On 22 June Cavallero received the German Military Attaché, General von Rintelen, and asked him if in his opinion the armoured corps should continue the advance towards Egypt, or rather stop at the border or slightly beyond to give precedence to the conquest of Malta. *"Without hesitation"*, von Rintelen remembers, *"I answered that evidently Malta was the priority and that the plan agreed upon with the OKW had to be executed"*[6]. Then Cavallero explained that he simply wanted to know his thoughts and be personally convinced of the urgency of Operation C3, *"an indispensable condition to having freedom of manoeuvrability and for not being taken from behind in the case of continuing operations in Libya"*[7].

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[5] Letter from Mussolini to Hitler dated 21/6/1942. For a wider and more exhaustive examination of the subject essentially refer to MARIANO GABRIELE, *Operazione C3: Malta*, Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore della Marina (USSMM), Rome, 1965. Also ALBERTO SANTONI and FRANCESCO MATTESINI, *La partecipazione tedesca alla Guerra navale nel Meditterraneo*, Rome, Ateneo e Bizzarri ed., 1980; KURT ASSMANN, *Anni fatali per la Germania*, Rome, USSMM, 1953; EMILIO FALDELLA, *L'Italia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Bologna, Capelli, 1959.

[6] VON RINTELEN E., *Mussolini Alleato*, Rome, Corsa, 1952.

[7] Cavallero's Diary.

But that night a telegram arrived in Rome from Rommel to von Rintelen:

> "The primary objective of the Panzerarmee Afrika, i.e. defeating the enemy field army and taking back Tobruk, has been achieved. Enemy parties are still holding out near Sollum, Halfaya, and Sidi Omar. There is now the intention to annihilate this enemy as well and in so doing open the way into the rest of Egypt. The condition and morale of the troops, the current situation with food supplies based on the reserves of war spoils and the current weakness of the enemy permit continuing to the heart of the Egyptian territory. Therefore, I implore you to obtain from the Duce that the limitation on the freedom of action, in vigour up until now, be lifted and that all the troops currently under my command be conceded to me in order to continue the fight"[8].

Von Rintelen immediately called General Jodl of the OKW, who, aware of Hitler's intentions, told him that the taking of Tobruk had changed the state of things so that the Malta exploit no longer seemed necessary. Von Rintelen asserts to having protested, but without result and so resigned himself to acting on the basis of the new directives[9]. In this frame of mind, he went to Cavallero on the 23rd at 11:10 and discussed Rommel's ideas and above all those of the OKW. Cavallero was deeply convinced of the urgency of getting Malta out of the way and had always followed and spurred on the preparations and joint-force planning. When he found himself wrong-footed by the OKW, though showing himself open to compromise, he raised concrete objections to their having radically turned over the agreements made:

> "I am saying that we don not have rigid ideas and that we are even willing to modify our plans. However, the difficulties with supplies and with diesel fuel should be kept in mind. I believe that even if a month's worth

[8] As deduced from the telegraphic module of the *Funkzentrale Rom*, delivered in the original German to the Supreme Command, the message was sent at 18:35 on the 22nd and received in Rome at 21:21 on the same day.

[9] VON RINTELEN E., *op. cit.*, pp. 159-160. The *Kriegstagebuch* of the SKL reports, under the date of 22 June: *"Marshal Rommel intends to continue the offensive. The Duce doesn't want to give him the approval, but instead draw the planned forces to carry out Operation* Hercules. *The Führer, by making a telephone call to our General at the Italian Supreme Command [von Rintelen] or eventually to the Duce, wants to get a free hand for Rommel and thinks that Operation* Hercules *can be postponed until the end of August"* (K. ASSMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 266).

of provisions were found, we need to implement the establishment of an escort for the advance *immediately*. I would also add that many more air force units are needed for an advance than the current (...).
I would point out that the enemy may provoke an action in Tunisia as a response to our advance in Egypt and we need to stay on alert in any case".

Then, well aware of who truly held decisional power, he explicitly asked: "*to state precisely if the Führer had decided to forego the action in Malta*"[10]. Then he went to Mussolini. It is unclear when von Rintelen delivered Hitler's answer to Mussolini, perhaps before going to Cavallero, perhaps after. What is certain is that Cavallero had to have known about the document at Palazzo Venezia because, when he returned to Palazzo Vidoni at 12:30 pm, the first subject he discussed with Admiral Riccardi was: *"The Führer's operational intentions for Egypt"*.

Riccardi assumed a decisively pessimistic attitude. Just two days earlier he had felt the need to call the attention of the Supreme Command back to the traffic to Northern Africa. The effects of the intense hammering by air having ceased - he had written - Malta had recovered, reacquiring a strong offensive air capability, while in the central Mediterranean the danger of submarines had greatly intensified in respect to the past. On account of the estimated short duration of Rommel's offensive, the traffic with Libya was sensibly reduced. In spite of that, in a few days two cargo ships, two speed boats and a destroyer were lost due to enemy submarines or ambushes by planes. The events of mid-June brought to a total paralysis in maritime movements. But the successive developments at Marmarica made a reestablishment of traffic indispensable. And the consequence was that the first convoy was heavily attacked, and the German steamer *Reichenberg* sunk - even if the enemy lost many planes. The situation, in brief, was such: the eastern and western routes were equally risky; escort vessels were limited and fuel even more so; fast cargo ships were numbered and therefore going back to the few remaining slow cargo ships was extremely risky. *"It is therefore absolutely indispensable* - concluded the statement of the High Command of the Navy (*Supermarina) - if you want to continue supplying Libya to start pressuring the Maltese air bases again as soon as possible*"[11].

Furthermore, as early as 11:15 that morning, Riccardi had confirmed by telephone that *"we are not in a position to guarantee regular supplies*

[10] Cavallero's Diary.
[11] DSCS, f. 16261 dated 21/6/1942 from *Supermarina*.

to Tobruk, unless we suppress Malta". As we can learn from Cavallero's diary, the brief meeting was disheartening.

Mussolini's letter, sent 21 June, was received by General Marras, the Italian military attaché in Berlin, in a moment of universal exaltation. Some time after, a Swedish observer commented:

> "The fall of Tobruk made an enormous impression in Berlin and in all of Germany. Morale rose immediately to a level that had not been reached since the conclusion of the battle for France in 1940. Rommel was the man of the day, for whom nothing was impossible. Maybe we can win the war after all, everyone said, and they abandoned themselves to the joys of a victory that they felt was truly a victory"[12].

In such a contagious climate and keeping in mind the news and the prospects advanced by Rommel, it is no wonder that the persistent personal hostility Hitler harboured for the C3 took explicit form and substance. As early as May, while there were furious preparations for *Hercules* in Germany as well, General Student, commander of the XI *Fliegerkorps*, was called to the General Headquarters of the Führer. Received by General Jeschonnek, Chief of the General Staff of the *Luftwaffe*, he was told: *"Student, tomorrow you will receive a difficult task from the Führer. General Cruwell of Afrikakorps was here this morning. Among other things, the morale of the Italian troops was discussed. Cruwell expressed a negative judgement in these regards. Hence the entire Malta venture is in danger!"*[13] The next day Student displayed the plans elaborated in Rome before a crowded auditorium. Hitler demonstrated his general acceptance of them, but even so, in closing, he expressed his own... enthusiastic thoughts about allies:

> "The realization of a bridgehead (in Malta) is guaranteed by your airborne troops. Well! So I guarantee the following will occur: when the attack begins, the British fleet will naturally leave from Alexandria immediately and other British forces will depart from Gibraltar as well. Then you'll see what the Italians will do at that point. They'll all turn back with the arrival of the first messages, including the Navy and the

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[12] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I., and TURNER L.C.F., *Crisis in the Desert*, Cape Town, Oxford University, 1952, p. 219.

[13] KUHN V., *Mit Rommel in der Wüste*, Stuttgart, Morotbuch Verlag, 1975, 2nd ed.

transports. Then you'll come down onto the island alone with your paratroopers!"

Student was not only a supporter of the venture, but calculated that the worst conditions would be good enough for the German paratroopers, if Malta's defensive system were shaken up before by preliminary air raids. Thus he replied:

"Field Marshal Kesselring has already provided for such an eventuality. It will happen to the English as it did last year in Crete, when Richtofen attacked and sank part of the Alexandria naval squadron, and likely even worse, because Malta is in the action range of the *Luftwaffe*. The flight from Sicily to Malta is shorter than the one from Greece or Crete. Furthermore, the distance by sea that separates the English from Malta is twice the one that separates them from Crete. So, my Führer, Malta can become a tomb for the British fleet in the Mediterranean"[14].

But there is more. On 15 June Hitler had said to Admiral Raeder who, backed by Kesselring, insisted on resolving the Malta problem once and for all:

"I fully recognize the importance of taking Malta. Nevertheless, I don't believe this can be done while whole the offensive on the eastern front is in progress and I don't believe, in particular, that it can be done with Italian troops. The *Luftwaffe* does not have transport planes available. Once Tobruk is taken, many carrier ships can be sent to Tobruk via Crete (avoiding Malta). On the other hand, the British efforts to get convoys to Malta from the east and from the west attest to the serious situation the island finds itself in. These convoys, incidentally, offer us a way of inflicting serious damage on the enemy. Once Malta has been bled dry and exhausted by continuous air raids and the total block, we can risk an attack"[15].

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[14] KUHN V., *op. cit.*, *According to Student, on that occasion, Hitler would have decided: "The attack against Malta would not be carried out in the year 1942".*

Along the same lines Student also expressed to Liddell Hart: "Hitler got suddenly alarmed [at Criwell's unfavourable report.] He was convinced that if the British fleet were to appear on the scene, all the Italian ships would have shrunk away in a hurry to their ports and would have left the aircraft carriers in the lurch. So he decided to set aside the plan to attack Malta" (B. LIDDEL HART, *Storia di una Sconfitta*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1979, p. 279).

[15] MARTIENSSEN A., *Hitler e i suoi ammiragli*, Milan, Garzanti, 1950.

When, therefore, Rommel had him asked for the permission to exploit the victory, despite the negative opinion of Raeder and Kesselring, Hitler immediately consented:

> "Field Marshal Rommel", as noted in the war diary of the *Seekriegsleitung* on 22 June, "intends to continue the offensive. The Duce doesn't want to give the go ahead, but wants to withdraw the troops earmarked for Operation Hercules. The Führer would like to get a free hand for Rommel by calling our liaison General at the Italian Supreme Command, or possibly the Duce, and it is conceivable that the execution of *Hercules* may be postponed until the end of August"[16].

Hitler, on the other hand, answered Mussolini personally, seizing what seemed to him a "*historic turn*" in the military plan for the entire war:

> "(...) Fate, Duce, has offered us a possibility that will in no way present itself again in the same theatre of the war. The most rapid and complete exploitation of this constitutes, in my opinion, the primary military objective. Up until now, I have always done my best to pursue every defeated enemy within our possibilities. The 8th British Army is practically destroyed (...).
> If the rest of this British Army is not pursued to the last breath of every man now, we could suffer the same thing that caused the English to miss success when, near Tripoli they suddenly stopped to send forces into Greece (...). If our forces do not continue to the extreme limit of possibility into the heart of Egypt now, above all, a new arrival of American bombers will take place (...). Moreover, it would be followed by a concentration of all the available English and American forces. In short, an unfavourable change in situation would result for us. But the relentless pursuit of our enemy will bring his destruction. This time, Egypt can, under certain conditions, be wrenched from the English (...).
> Therefore if I, Duce, in this historic hour that will not be repeated, can give you some advice that comes from the most solicitous heart, it is this: order operations to continue until the British troops are completely annihilated as long as your Command and Marshal Rommel believe it is militarily possible with their forces. The goddess of fortune in bat-

[16] ASSMAN K., *op. cit.*, p. 266.

tle passes near leaders only once. One who does not seize her on such an occasion will be hard pressed to reach her again. The fact that the English, against every rule in the art of war, interrupted their first march on Tripoli to venture on to another battlefield has saved us, Duce, and brought the English to one of their worst defeats. If we leave aside pursuing the British to their annihilation now, the result will be a great number of worries later (...)"[17].

In the meantime, in the late afternoon of the 22nd, a meeting between Bastico and Rommel took place. As the latter had moved his tactical headquarters to the roadman's house on the Balbia Way about 28 kilometres from Bardia, the high commander, having reached Tobruk by car a little after midday accompanied by General Barbasetti, (Chief of Staff of the Italian High Command in Africa) continued on to the village at about 14:30. Reaching his destination at 17:00, he found quite a "service" environment.

Rommel began an account with enthusiastic confidence in the operational possibilities open to the Axis, due to the confirmed defeat of the 8th Army and the temporary impossibility of its recovery. Therefore, they were dealing with a unique opportunity to push forward without hesitation, pursuing the enemy and keeping them from organizing resistance at Matruh and the El Alamein gap, and to resolutely head for Cairo and the Canal. Bastico found himself taken by surprise. Apart from the Supreme Command directives that tied his hands, he had not taken such a deep push into consideration. He tried to gain time without directly answering the question, *"the directives of the Supreme Command"*, he observed, *"do not agree with your plans. We need to stop at Sollum Halfaya and only after the operation in Malta and when we have reorganized our forces, which are exhausted, would we be able to take up the march towards the east again". "I don't know any other directives"*, Rommel interrupted rudely, *"than those of the Führer and the directives of the Führer, in this case, are identical to mine. Tobruk kept up the morale of the British. Without Tobruk they are destroyed. The same happened with the French when they lost Paris"*. Bastico, annoyed, said that in that case he would never have given the order to continue, at which point Rommel, extremely irritated, brusquely left the meeting place. When he returned, General Barbasetti and Mancinelli (Chief of Staff of Communications with the armoured corps) had persuaded Bastico

[17] Letter from Hitler to Mussolini dated 23/6/1942.

to discuss the subject, though reserving the decision (some decision!) to the Supreme Command, and he pointed out the inevitable difficulties inherent in such an operational plan. Excited, Rommel gave an answer to every objection: a large part of the supplies had been swallowed up by the offensive: but the spoils taken at Tobruk guaranteed at least a month of autonomy; to make the communications between Italy and Libya secure, Malta had to be eliminated: but the problem could be resolved on African territory; supplying the troops from Tripoli and Bengasi was not sustainable: but the port of Tobruk would be reopened in a few days and it would be possible to support forward units with coasting vessels; the attacking body of the army ran the risk of quickly becoming ineffective: but on the heals of the 8th Army, an inversion of the of force ratio would be avoided. In short, Rommel admitted, the match was difficult, but not impossible and he felt he had to give it a chance. A part of him was truly convinced of what he was saying, another part was optimism of the highest degree, another part stubbornness, and yet another an intolerance for conflicts, especially those he felt were provoked by ill will or a preconceived disagreement. So all of a sudden he got upset again and exclaimed with emphasis:

> "I'm free to the sides and in front. No one can stop me. I know that in Rome they insist on accomplishing this attack on Malta. It needed to be done earlier. Besides, Malta, bombed like it should be and watched over by the Italian Navy, will not bother us".

Then, taking his cap, he added, *"I'm leaving. If the Italians want to follow, let them come, otherwise, let them stop. For me it's the same!"* Obviously, he had to admit that such a decision could not be made in that moment, and that the officers attending the meeting did not have the authority to take it on, given the dimensions of the political, military and strategic problem. Suddenly his mood changed. He smiled at Bastico and said, *"Right from now, I'll invite you to breakfast in Cairo"*[18].

Bastico assured that the terms of the matter would be precisely pointed out to Rome and he left without expressing his own personal point of view. Nevertheless, Rommel's reasoning had him three quarters convinced. The next morning he sent a report on the conversation to Rome:

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[18] BASTICO E., *Settimanale Tempo*, no. 50, dated 9/12/1942, "Dal Fronte dell'Africa Settentrionale", Milan, Rizzoli, 1950, pp. 126-129.

"I met with Rommel yesterday afternoon at 22:00 in Bardia during a break in the very frequent current movements of his tactical headquarters. My Chief of General Staff also attended the meeting. Among other things, examining the situation after the seizure of the border line, Rommel made the following statements: the situation to the east is particularly favourable and a similar situation may not present itself again in the future. It should be taken advantage of, and he intends to take advantage of it; the Führer has given him directives for the conquest of Egypt. He intends to immediately clarify this point to Rome and Berlin. He maintains that he would be able to put the conquest into effect with the forces already available; it does not matter if Kesselring's air force units are withdrawn, as it has been ordered; the enemy is so defeated that massive aerial action is no longer necessary. Rommel adds that he does not have logistic worries because food, equipment, petrol and ammunition (also Italian) have been found in the warehouses that were taken. All these, he affirms, are now exploitable. He also added that the German troops have all that is necessary to reach the Nile and that he hopes the Italian troops will follow them.

I am convinced that, despite the precise limitations of the Supreme Command, which he was reminded of yesterday, Rommel, also due to the exaltation of his great victory, will not stop if -as is foreseeable- the action against the Sidi Omar line is successful, provided that he manages to come into contact with the British troops. He intends to attack tomorrow, the 24th.

He repeated that certain orders are not received but you must know how to follow them just the same. Nor do I think that Rommel will limit future operations to simple thrusts on Sidi Barrani or Marsa Matruk. He intends to hit the residual English troops and take control of or destroy warehouses; once the troops are launched it is not foreseeable that he will induce them to return. All this will take place in short time. To halt him after the Sidi Barrani or the Marsa Matruk action it would necessary to give him strict and mandatory orders from which Rommel cannot escape.

I express an opinion that hypothesises the conquering of Egypt given the current material and morale conditions of the enemy forces, certainly apart from the political situation that I do not know and the difficulties present, but that cannot be excluded. Furthermore, a hasty inventory of the stock of war spoils available as of the day after the conquest indicates that the presence of big warehouses in Tobruk, Bardia and probably Marsa Matruk may facilitate a solution to the logistic problem

in terms of food and petrol, not so much regarding transportation. The possession of the port of Tobruk also contributes to solving the problem. However, I feel it is necessary, in any case, to keep Rommel from acting of his own initiative or forcing the hand with only German forces; if German forces march to conquer Egypt, the Italian forces should also participate and they should be (with all of their force) the *Littorio,* which was provided with vehicles by the High Command, the *Ariete,* and the *Trieste* if Rommel employs the 15th and the 21st and the 90th, while X and XXI could remain, for every eventuality, deployed on the border zone.
If it is the intention of the Supreme Command to favour Rommel's plans, every effort will be made by the High Command to overcome the logistic problems, that are in any fact less simple than Rommel estimates, but do not seem unsolvable, also by adopting opportune unit arrangements which the favourable current situation that has been achieved can allow"[19].

The message presented the situation exactly, Bastico's point of view is reported clearly and Rommel's probable initiatives brought into focus. So any comment is superfluous, other than underlining Bastico's warning: *I do not know the political situation.*

So, on the 23rd, Hitler's letter, Bastico's report, a communication from Kesselring that leaned towards an advance up to El Daba, (considered devoid of excessive danger due to the shock suffered by the 8th)[20] but above all some precious information arrived in Rome one after the other. An appraisal of the military situation was intercepted and decoded in the Libyan-Egyptian zone formulated by the American military Attaché in Cairo to the U.S. War Department[21].

According to Lieutenant Colonel Fellers, the mobile forces of the Axis (DAK and XX Armoured Corps) numbered altogether 40,000 men and approximately 270 tanks (increasable to 390 by month's end) and they could engage the support of thousands of aircraft - of which at least 50% efficient. The 8th Army had five divisions in all, of which two were worn,

[19] DSCSAS telegram 01/12024/op. dated 23/6/1942, 10:45 hours, decoded in Rome at 15:10. *The occasion calls for a topographical clarification. In all of the Italo-German correspondence I have written "Marsa Matruh" or even "Marsa Matruk", which is the incorrect name: the place name is Matruh and Marsa Matruh is simply the little "door" in the cove north of the habitation. Oddly, in the Axis sphere, whether in Africa or Rome or Berlin, the habit of indicating the locality with the name Marsa Matruh immediately took off.*

[20] DSCSAS, telegram 0235 dated 23/6/1942, 12:00 hours from Marshal Kesselring.

[21] DSCS, "Appraisal of the situation in the Libyan-Egyptian sector on the days of 19-21 June".

and maybe an autonomous brigade; of the 1,564 tanks available on 27 May, 100 tanks were available on the frontline plus another 27 in the Delta; the artillery losses consisted in around 50% of the guns; the morale of the army and the Royal Air Force was extremely low, the *Mediterranean Fleet* was impotent. The evaluation continued:

"Considerations.
Rommel could attempt an invasion of Egypt after a serious period of reorganisation of his units, during which the Axis could otherwise attack Malta, in order to secure an uninterrupted line of supplies from Italy and Greece.

To face the situation it is necessary:

- to unify the command of the army and the air force;
- to reorganize the 8th Army under a new command with new methods;
- to delay and distract the Axis forces, interrupting at the same time navigation in order to stop vital supplies for the Axis;
- to sink all the supplies on route to Libya.

The interruption of Axis supplies has to be achieved, otherwise the Middle East will be completely at Rommel's mercy.

Conclusion;
1 - the army was defeated principally because of a lack of leadership;
2 - if Rommel plans to take the Delta, this is the opportune time;
3 - the British need to move quickly with the aim of pulling together a serious resistance to the Axis forces;
4 - to keep the Middle East the British are to be supplied immediately, in order of importance, with a considerable quantity of bombers, tanks and artillery;
5 - an armoured army corps, consisting in two armoured divisions, an infantry division with anti-tank battalions as corps combat support, has to be sent to the Middle East as soon as possible".

At 17:25 on that same 23 June, Cavallero called von Rintelen. He had Bastico's report in front of him, delivered a couple of hours before. Both knew that at that point Mussolini had made his choice:

"When I brought Mussolini Hitler's letter", von Rintelen remembers, "it was received almost too favourably, to my regret (...). He looked at me

with pride and was all fire and brimstone for the immediate attack on Egypt and for the taking of Cairo and Alexandria. Mussolini's trust in Hitler's strategy was intact up to that moment"[22].

The American document was the finishing stroke. Or, perhaps, it had calmed some consciences. Cavallero saw himself as isolated and dissatisfied. *"Rommel doesn't deal with the problem* (with transports)", he exclaimed, *"we do!"* Postponing meant not talking about C3 again until 1943 and continuing the serious burden on aviation of keeping Malta under pressure. The only thing to do was to keep preparations for the exploit at full force (another burden) so that it could be executed immediately without hindrances in case the opportunity unexpectedly presented itself.

That said, Cavallero prepared a telegram for Bastico first of all:

"Response 12024/Op. According to information here attained from reliable sources, the collapse of the British forces is greatly superior to what we could expect and constitutes new situation that permits consideration of continuing advance on Egypt. Duce agrees completely with Rommel's thoughts; however, considers that he needs to examine some important problems of interest in the Mediterranean zone. To this end Duce has arranged for General Chief of Staff to be there day 25 with the Chief of Staff of the Air Force"[23].

Then he presided over a meeting attended by the Chiefs of Staff of the Navy and of the Air Force and, of course von Rintelen, to try to square the circle. In essence, it concluded without making any decisions: only hopes and intentions for the future. First: start the incursions on Malta again to the maximum extent, asking for reinforcements from Kesselring, in Sicily, of a fighter group and two bomber groups, to reach a total of three-four German fighter groups, the same number of Italian fighter units and six-seven bomber groups. Second: await Keitel's reply to the request for diesel fuel and in the meantime draw from the reserves. Third: not abandon Operation C3, even if it is necessary to divert some of the assigned forces for the Tobruk operations. In these regards, Riccardi warned that the oper-

[22] VON RINTELEN E., *op. cit.*, p. 160.

[23] DSCS, telegram 31270/Op. dated 23/6/1942, 21:30 hours, arrived at Supreme Command at 3:30 hours on 24 June.

ation would still be feasible up until the 10-20 September, after which no more due to sea conditions and weather.

At 20:00 Cavallero went to *Palazzo Venezia* to present the results of the meeting. We do not know what Mussolini commented, although some of the notes in Cavallero's diary from the date of 24 June are illuminating. At 10:25 to the Generals, Fassi and Gandin, of the Supreme Command, *"New task of the General Staff. C3. Movement of forces in Sicily"*, at 11:00 to General Marras, *"Eventuality of operation on Biserta"*, at 18:00 to General Geloso, *"Necessity for orientation towards Tunisia"*. On 25 June the General Chief of Staff left for Derna.

Let's go back to Marmarica. The morning of the 23rd, after having sent the report on the meeting with Rommel to Rome, Bastico shared Mussolini's disposition with Kesselring that *"in any case, Air Force units assigned for other Theatres of Operations be freed as soon as possible"*. Then he had a message sent to General Mancinelli (Chief of Italian Liaison Staff with the Panzerarmee Headquarters) as a precaution:

> "In the eventuality that higher orders reach us approving concepts expressed yesterday 22nd by Rommel, please ask the General if he has already established even approximate lines of operation and above all number of forces to employ. This question is aimed to study possible logistical and tactical course of action intended to face any eventuality and help to reach objectives as much as possible. I repeat that it has to do with a simple study in case new directives arrive which must be applied rapidly (...)"[24].

But he was not calm. He feared an outburst from Rommel, so he sent Mancinelli a second dispatch for use and consumption of the new Marshal. He had to communicate the content of Cavallero's telegram 31249/Op. dated 21 June to the commander of the armoured forces. It was worth telling him of the necessity for promptly *"organizing"* the troops at the Sollum-Halfaya front and of the opportunity for taking back Giarabub[25].

Rommel was in a hurry, and for good reason. Having executed a quick calculation of the presumed opposing forces, he arrived at the conclusion

[24] DSCSAS, telegram 01/12026 Op. dated 23/6/1942, 11:00 hours.
[25] DSCSAS, telegram 01/12028 Op. Dated 23/6/1942, 12:20 hours.

that he could attack immediately with the forces immediately available. The enemy dispositions seemed to consist of the 5th Indian Brigade in a stronghold from Sollum to Halfaya; the remainder of the 10th Indian Division at Sidi Omar, the 7th Armoured Division detached between Sidi Omar and Maddalena and the rest of the 5th Indian Division in the latter place. Up until then there was no aggressive behaviour on the British side. The 1st South African appeared to be aligned on positions in Bug Bug.

The Italo-German Army was now concentrated on the Balbia Way (the infantries) and on Trigh el Abd (the mobile forces). Not that that would be all. The transfer of the X Corps and XXI Corps was underway using both civilian and military vehicles, but in notable disarray, deriving mostly from fragmentary orders. *"The morning of the 23rd"*, wrote General Lombardi, *"the mess on the Tobruk-Bardia road reached unsurpassable limits. Units of all kinds moved on the same itinerary, flanking each other and sometimes overtaking each other in three or four lines"*[27]. To the south, on Trigh el Abd, the 90th Light followed in the Bir Gibni zone, the DAK by Gabr Meliha and the XX Corps in Gabr Saleh.

The orders issued in the course of the morning sent the X Corps close to Capuzzo, with the right to the north-east of Sidi Omar, the XXI north of Capuzzo, the body jockeying to get past the border outflanking from the south the Sidi Omar positions with an arrangement similar to that enacted for 26 May to surround Bir Hacheim. The attack was a vain attempt. There was no enemy response, other than, sometimes, some violent artillery shelling. Many symptoms indicated a retreat from the border positions.

In the early hours of the 24th Rommel received a communication from von Rintelen: *"Duce approves of the* Panzerarmee*'s intention of pursuing the enemy into Egypt. General Cavallero will arrive in Africa 25 June on behalf of the Duce bringing new directives. Because of the revival of Malta the maritime transport situation is difficult, thus transfer of* Luftwaffe *units to Sicily is indispensable for assuring our supplies, as they will keep Malta under pressure (...)*. Taking advice from the message, he hurried to issue new dispositions.

At 4:00 General Navarini sent a laconic phonogram: *"The enemy probably retreating. XXI Corps in pursuit through Sollum up to Bug Bug"*.

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[26] Given the absolute impossibility of being transported by vehicles, the 19th Infantry and the I/28th Infantry remained temporarily in Tobruk.

[27] Report by General G. Lombardi dated 20/6/1943 in "La D.F: *Brescia* nella battaglia della Cirenaica e dell'Egitto (26 giugno-31 luglio 1942)".

And four hours later, *"Enemy retreating. Strictly pursue them on assigned objectives. Open the way for supplies as soon as possible"*. Navarini was able to auto-transport some divisions, thanks to motor vehicles received from the Logistic Headquarters for Northern Africa and war spoils. All in all, he could count on four battalions from the *Trento* (Infantry Division), the two from the 7th *Bersaglieri* and the IV Grenadiers Anti-tank Battalion as infantry, and on the 46th Artillery, the 3rd *Celere* Artillery and the III/24th Artillery (equipped with 105/28 howitzers). With these units, the "Navarini pursuit group" went on along the coastal route, leaving the *Sabratha* (Infantry Division) to join up as soon as possible between Bardia and Capuzzo. At 16:30 the 7th *Bersaglieri*, as a vanguard, reached Bug Bug. At 20:00 they moved again on Sidi el Barrani, recognized the evacuation of the enemy and occupied it some hours later.

General Gioda (X Corps Commander) had arrived at the border with three battalions of the *Brescia*, two of the *Pavia* and two of the 9th *Bersaglieri,* not to mention all the divisional and Corps artillery. *"In my opinion*, "he wrote to the High Command in the morning of the 24th, *"the current operational situation is extremely favourable for us. So, the seven battalions and 100 artillery guns which the X Corps has available should be sufficient, also to avoid rendering any future movements too heavy"*[28]. This was pure optimism. He had been instructed to pursue the enemy following XXI Corps as quickly as possible as he had already sent back two truck sections received as temporary reinforcements and thirty civilian vehicles (trucks and trailers) in the evening of the 23rd. These vehicles transported some *Littorio* units to Tobruk. Now Gioda was hardly able to form up a column with the 9th *Bersaglieri*, 2 battalions from *Pavia*, and from *Brescia* divisions, reinforcing them with his artillery. All the rest of his Corps had to be concentrated in Bardia, waiting for the next transport eastwards. The 9th *Bersaglieri,* leaving in the afternoon, stopped in Bug Bug at dusk. The enemy seemed disposed to deploy in defensive positions in the Marsa Matruh entrenched camp. The reaction mainly consisted of intense air bombing.

In the south the 90th Light and the DAK, with the residual 50 tanks, continued the advance following the railway line as a direction of march. Reaching Bir Misheifa, they descended on the coastline and refuelled abundantly from an abandoned enemy fuel depot in Bir Enba zone. In the evening of the 24th the German reconnaissance units proceeding over a

[28] Historical Diary of the XX Armed Corps, f.4481/Op. dated 24/6/1942.

large front were about seventy kilometres from Matruh. Even though the movement had hardly encountered any obstacles, aside from those presented by the terrain, it was nevertheless brilliantly carried out.

The XX Corps halted in the Bir Enba zone, rather worn-out too: the *Ariete* remained with 600 *bersaglieri* troops, 10 tanks and 15 guns; the *Trieste* with 1,500 men, 4 tanks and 24 guns; the *Littorio* with 1,000 men, 30 tanks and 11 guns (Sketch N. 1).

The most satisfying note of the day was the further capture of remarkable quantities of materials, meal rations and fuel, despite the fact that the enemy had seen to unload and destroy many warehouses and depots.

The typical landscape appearing to the eyes of the victor was clearly visible from the border on. Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, were signs of defeat and disorder. Groups and columns of prisoners, on foot and in trucks, were heading west. There were overturned trucks and burned armoured vehicles, damaged tanks, piles of intact supplies, jerrycans and split-open boxes, artillery weapons either in an excellent state or semi-destroyed, and abandoned equipment.

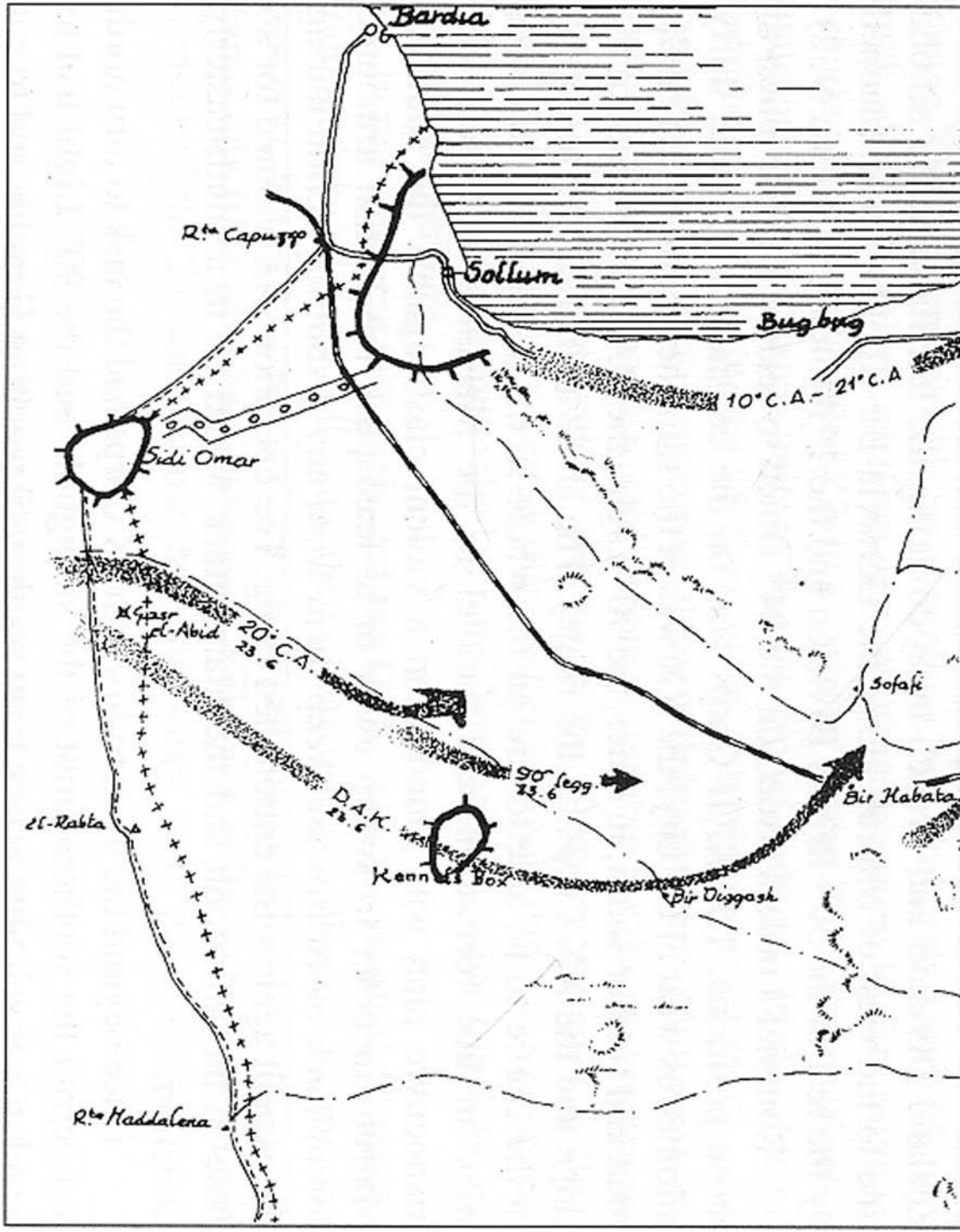
As far as it was known, the deployment of the 8th Army consisted in a front line from Matruh to Bir el Gellaz, kept by the 10th Indian Division, the 1st South African Division and the 7th Armoured, along the track for Siwa. The entrenched camp at Matruh was defended by the 2nd New Zealand Division and French units covering the left flank and a second line to the west of Matruh along the Gerawla-Bir-Khalda Track, manned by the rest of the 50th British Division and the 1st Armoured (Sketch N. 2).

Rommel's orders issued on the 24th aimed to realize the disruption of those positions. The XXII Corps was on the coastal route, about thirty kilometres west of the city; the XX was at the same height but south on the road and further south, in order, the 90th Light, the DAK (at the foot of the ridge and the XX Corps on the ridge). The army artilleries had to deploy in the centre to be able to fire on the whole front. In brief, all the forces were in line formation, and parallel to the Matruh-Siwa Track. The manoeuvre plan was founded on a violent clash against the south of Matruh, in order to sweep away or at least push the British armoured forces back eastwards and keep them from any disturbing action during the assault against the entrenched camp. The operation was planned for 26 June in the afternoon and the main attack would be in a south-easterly direction.

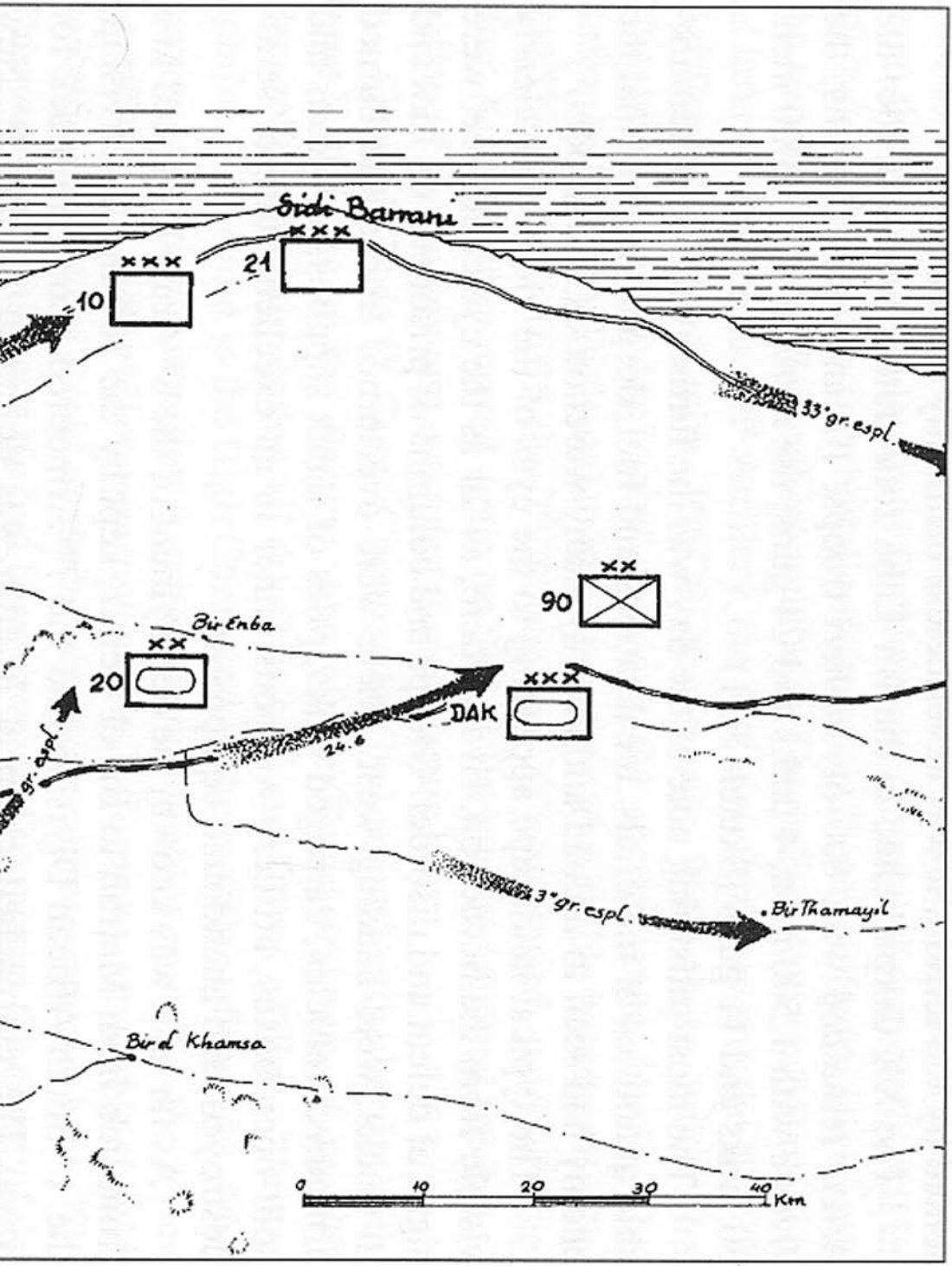
Once beyond the track to Siwa, the X Corps had the task to turn north to overrun the southern front of the stronghold and the 90th Light had to develop a enveloping action from south until reaching Gerawla and to cut

Sketch

"THE SITUATION ON 24 J



N. 1
UNE IN THE EVENING"



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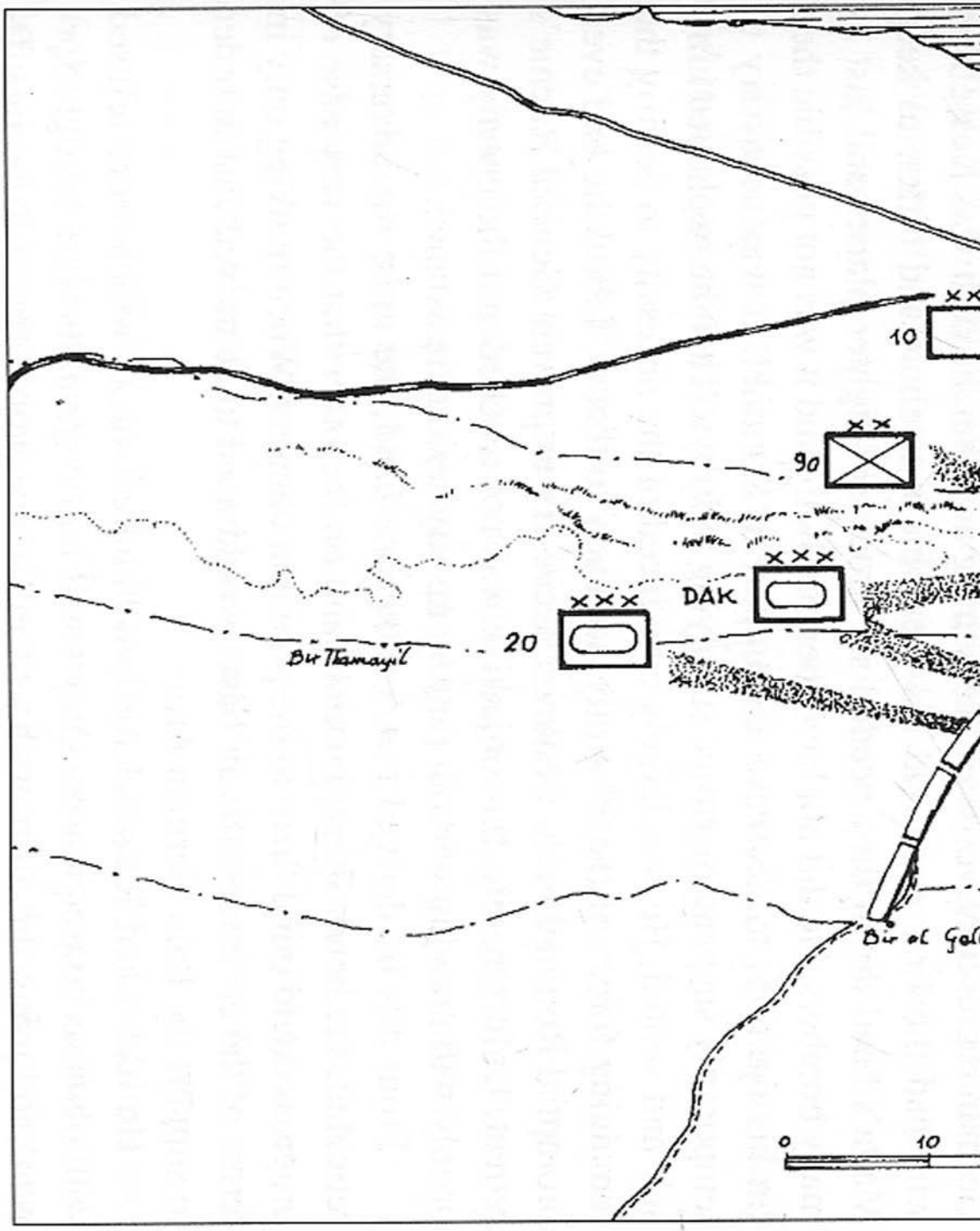
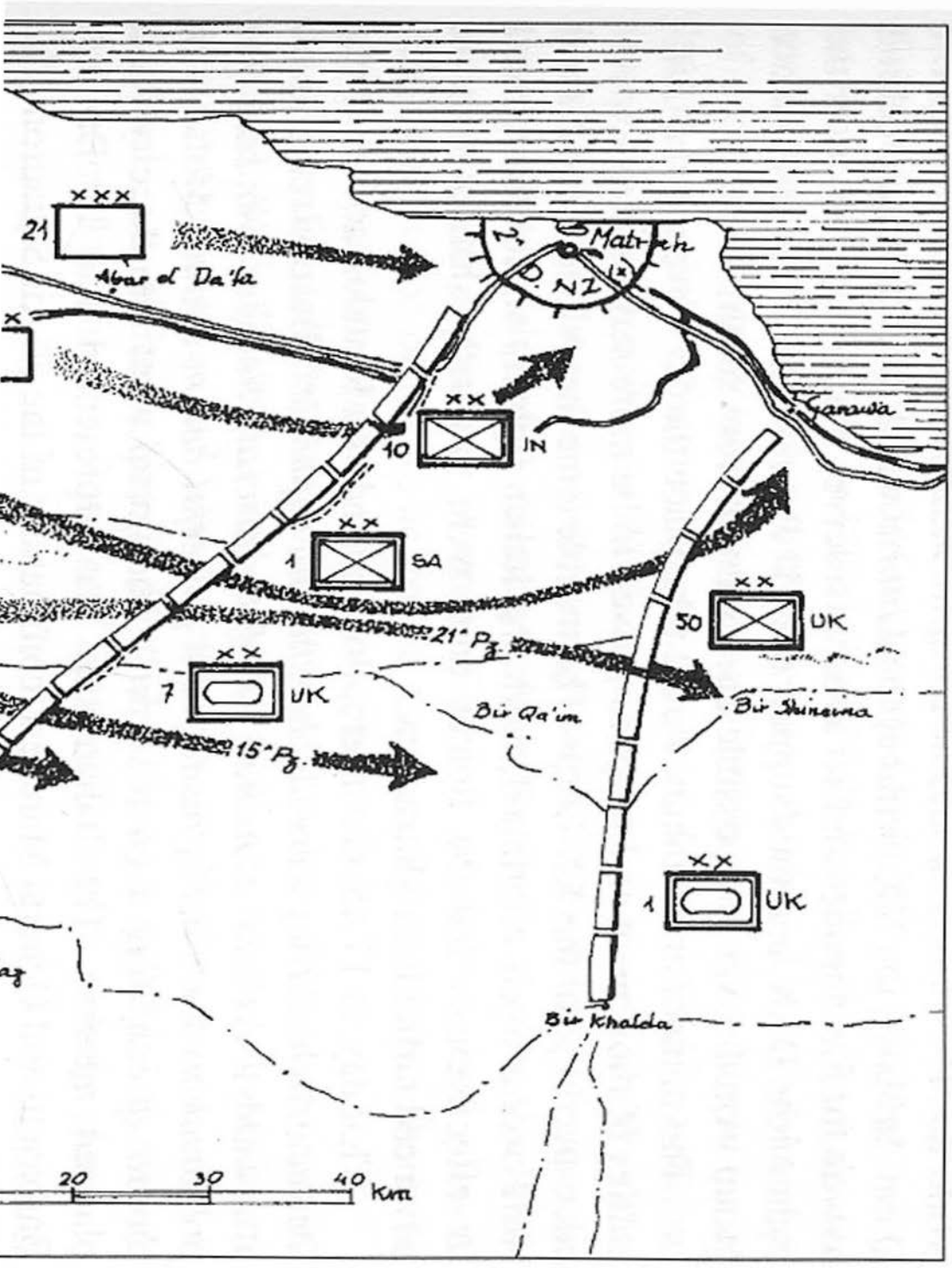
"ROMMEL'S MANOEU

AND THE ASSUMED BRIT



ch N. 2
UVRE PLAN IN MATRUH
ISH FORMATION (24 JUNE)"



enemy's line of retreat to east. The DAK, on the other hand, had to effect a pincer manoeuvre to isolate and destroy the enemy forces on the ridge: the 21st *Panzer*, arriving in Bir Shineina, would create the desired isolation while the 15th *Panzer* would arrive in a straight line to the south of Bir Qaim. Initially, the XX (without the *Littorio* which was to remain behind to wait for fuel supplies and act as army reserve) was expected to cover the right of the DAK, and thus support the 15th *Panzer*. The 3rd reconnaissance group would cover any possible enemy threat from south.

The planned movements would take place the 25th, even if the difficulties of movement and supplies proved to be more serious than expected, especially for the XX Corps. The troublesome incursions of the *Desert Air Force* actively continued, while the Italian fighters air cover regained its effectiveness and the fighter units were gradually shifted to more advanced airfields in Marmarica.

That day, at 17:45, Cavallero, Fougier and von Rintelen arrived at the Derna airfield. *"They were all cheerful and euphoric"*, Bastico remembers afterwards, *"As soon as he had got off the aircraft, Fougier even said that preparations were being made for a powerful action against Malta with the air of confiding a great secret"*. The group went into the city for a planned meeting. The Italian side was represented also by Bastico, Barbasetti and General Marchesi, commander of the 5th Air Squadron. The German representatives were Kesselring and Weichold. It was Kesselring who had the first word and his preamble was short and bitter: to keep Malta's head down they needed six groups of fighter planes and just as many bombers. He did not have them in Sicily and it was not possible then (in his opinion) to decrease air support to Rommel. It was necessary to temporarily suspend maritime supplying to Libya. Then he explained himself and vented. He was largely convinced of the necessity to destroy the remaining forces of the 8th Army, so much so that at Tobruk he had even prompted Rommel to do whatever necessary to prevent General Ritchie's retreat. Unfortunately, this objective was not reached and the enemy was openly withdrawing without putting up any serious resistance.

From this he derived that, on the one hand, the more the adversary retreated, the better their situation, and on the other that the very ease of progress could blind them to the potential dangers. When thinking only in terms of the air forces, the air bases would need to be moved east in order to support the Italo-German Army.

He had asked Rommel for two hundred trucks which were refused with obvious consequences. Only small *Luftwaffe* units were brought forward and using the air units based in Greece would reveal to be insuffi-

cient, even if Rommel minimized the disadvantage, maintaining that arriving at El Alamein gap was not difficult (about 180 kilometres) and would be sufficient to deprive the adversary of their airfields.

After all, continued Kesselring, as many losses as the *Desert Air Force* had suffered, you needed to account for the 600 aircraft that had to be faced with barely 120 or 130 airplanes held between the Germans and the Italians, half of which unusable because obsolete. He was convinced of being able to carry out a complete movement up to El Alamein (as he had assured Hitler), but not beyond. He paused, then added in a serious tone, *"I feel responsible for this judgement before history"*. On the other hand, the possibilities for air attacks against the heart of Egypt from positions in El Alamein were extremely favourable. In the end, he absolutely warned against a complete advance. If he was given the order, he would obey, but in fear of seeing an end to the campaign. However, he commented, Operation *Hercules* was three quarters lost.

According to what Bastico remembers, Cavallero listened and nodded his head. When Kesselring had finished, there was a moment of silence *"as if everyone there had their breath taken away"*. Cavallero wanted to emphasize the Malta problem in particular, but it seems he did so without conviction, knowing that Rome and Berlin had already sunk the plan:

> *"Malta"*, he said, *"disturbs our sleep at night and no one can get it out of my head that as long as that island is alive in the middle of the Mediterranean, we won't be able to do anything good or decisive"*.

Kesselring wanted to synthesize the operational course of action and did so in clear and simple terms:

> "First case: the advance continues and in eight or ten days will reach an end; (that is in El Alamein) in this period nothing can be done against Malta. Second case: the advance halts; (on border positions) the action against Malta is taken up again, the supply flow starts again and the advance is taken up fed by the supplies received.
> The first case is the only real possibility because we are too weak to fight on two fronts. I have the distinct feeling that continuing the advance (beyond El Alamein) will compromise all of the battle's success".

Apart from all this, he did not know how it would be possible to move *Luftwaffe* units. Cavallero was, at least in this sense, less pessimistic. First, he assured that supplying would begin again with three ship convoys

directed to Bengasi and with air transports, in order to make ends meet while waiting to take up the neutralization of Malta again, which should take place within three weeks. Then he had him read what the S.I.M. had intercepted regarding the messages sent by Lieutenant Colonel Fellers to the U.S. War Office and observed that, having passed Matruh, it was also possible that everything would tumble. Then Weichold intervened (the absence of a qualified member of the Italian Navy is to be noted) finding the route for cargo convoys to Bengasi and Tobruk to be satisfactory, but suggesting that a division of Italian cruisers be detached to Suda, on the island of Crete. And so the meeting ended without any decisions. Nor was it possible to contact Rommel because he was conducting inspections at the forward lines.

Although almost midnight Mancinelli would confirm hearing in the afternoon: *"The next objective of Marshal Rommel will be Cairo rather than Alexandria"*[29], the conversation with Kesselring had confirmed the decisions already sketched out with Mussolini, so that the morning of the 26th Cavallero delivered the formal objectives of the Supreme Command, which concluded:

"4. Therefore the Duce orders:

a) to first prepare to occupy the gap between the Gulf of Arabia and the Qattara Depression with the majority of the troops; this position must represent the departure base for every further action;
b) with this goal in mind first eliminate the fortified fields in the Matruh-Bagush zone, annihilating enemy forces drawn up on the Marsa Matruh position and avoiding to proceed if leaving behind any not yet eliminated strongpoint;
c) subordinate further advance of the forces beyond the gap indicated in a) to the comprehensive situation in the Mediterranean;

5. As has already been said it is necessary to keep in mind that the enemy will be able to rapidly reinforce their air formations; it is therefore indispensable to make every effort to bring forth Italo-German Air Force formations promptly.

6. Arrangements to occupy the oases of Giarabub and Siwa will be made as soon as possible"[30].

[29] DSCSAS, telegram no. 3161, 23:50 hours from Col. Mancinelli.
[30] DSCS, telegram f. 31300/op. dated 26/6/1942.

It is interesting to observe the opinions of the main players up to this point. Rommel intended to resolve the match and made no mystery of wanting to get to Cairo. Hitler, not at all convinced about the Malta venture, openly supported him and Mussolini willingly let himself be sucked in by the enthusiasm and the prospect of entering Egypt as a conqueror. Kesselring passed from the clear preference for an immediate initiation of Operation *Hercules* to the conviction that, unfortunately, given the circumstances, it would be preferable to continue to El Alamein, which left little hope for carrying out the occupation of Malta anytime soon. Cavallero was attached to Malta, but knew that Hitler and Mussolini's orientation in favour of Rommel was irreversible, and so accepted Kesselring's idea: yes to the advance, but only to El Alamein and then think about Malta.

Even Weichold got into line, when he considered that the transfer of Italian naval forces to Crete would concur to resolve the convoy's security problem and hoped the situation would help him to convince the OKW to increase the diesel deliveries to Italy. Riccardi was missing, but had he been present he would have said that the June transports were the lowest they had ever been since the beginning of the war (32,327 tons had arrived in Libya, not counting the 9,000 tons sunk by torpedo bombers based on Malta), that the convoys drew diesel from the battleships and from the fleet cruisers and that the main worry that now concerned the Italian Navy was to see some available fuel come to light.

In the end, Bastico had formulated clear ideas about the discussions with Rommel and limited himself to worrying about logistic matters that he knew full well would be difficult to resolve.

A brief comment about this picture. Kesselring's thesis, that at this point it would be worth pushing to El Alamein, also given the possibilities offered by Axis aviation, is undoubtedly grounded. But he meant that the forward move of *Luftwaffe* units would have been started *before*, since it was necessary to overcome the land transport problems in Africa, that was an Italian responsibility. Cavallero's compliance with this line of thought was also acceptable, under the condition that he had a clear solution in mind and the firm determination to put it into act, but most importantly the possibility of carrying it out. Instead, it did not seem like things were exactly like so then. To move its strategic barycentre to eastern Mediterranean, the Italian Navy needed diesel and this was supplied by Germany; the same to escort the convoys and assume control of the seas

in that area. To prevent air raids from Malta against objectives in Italy, in Sicily and on the sea, air reinforcement was necessary and this also depended on Germany; so was keeping Malta under pressure. Furthermore, to realize Operation C3, German aid was needed. In short, whatever course of action one wanted to take, it *had* to be agreed upon with the OKW or even with Hitler first.

Then on the formal level, repeated quotes by Mussolini in the written directives stand out: *"... the Duce orders"* and *"on behalf of the Duce"*. Cavallero's intention of bracing himself up against Rommel by using Mussolini is evident, and also that of keeping the latter from contradicting himself later. However, let's be frank, the implicit renunciation of taking one's duty and making the responsibility of it felt, provokes discontent and dislike.

On 26 June, the group of military commanders met in the Italo-German Army forward headquarters. Rommel was not there yet. *"He arrived after about an hour"*, Bastico remembers, *"scowling and white with dust. He did not stand on ceremony with anyone; in fact, he did not even say a word to Kesselring"*[31]. As soon as he had entered the roadman's house, Rommel began a blunt and frank statement of the situation, *"We are marching and getting close to the Marsa Matruh strongpoint. I know it will be a tough one. It has a base perimeter of about 20 kilometres and deep 4 (...). Inside of Marsa Matruh there is enough material to supply an entire army"*.

"And after Marsa Matruh?" asked Cavallero.

"I will go ahead as long as it is possible", Rommel responded dryly, *"I have little petrol and very little water but in this climate of success the soldiers don't ask to drink and not even to eat. They just want to go forward"*. Then he turned to Bastico, *"The Italian soldiers that followed my orders were also magnificent. On the field there was no difference between them and the Germans. At this point there is no reason to stop. What was left behind will have to come ahead as soon as there is an occasion or a chance"*. He then moved the discussion to aviation. The (British) Royal Air Force was very active, but before long would be deprived of the airports they currently used. The objective of the action was to reach and pass

[31] Kesselring had preceded over the group of Italian Generals, wanting to talk eye to eye with Rommel. We do not know the tone of this conversation, cited in Cavallero's diary, and probably taking place somewhere else, which would explain Bastico's version. It is evident that the friction between the two field marshals had acquired a physiognomy, so that Mancinelli's observation that "(...) each of the two German commanders considered the other's intervention into discussions and operational decisions with diffidence" was reputed as valid (G. MANCINELLI, *op. cit.*, p. 72).

over El Alamein gap rapidly, *"further objective the Nile, to trigger the fall of Alexandria and the seizure of Cairo"*.

Cavallero intervened at this point to specify that the objective of Cairo was strategically to be understood as Cairo-Suez. This throw back is astonishing knowing the directives he had in his pocket. Perhaps it would have been more opportune to say the "*further phase objective*" would be spoken of in due time.

Rommel addressed Kesselring, *"I need assistance with the Führer so fresh troops and armoured units can get urgently sent to me"*, but Kesselring calmed his request. There were too many irons in the fire everywhere, so at least temporarily it would be difficult to hope for something solid. He himself had only received a few new *Stukas*. While the argument was raging, contradictory news arrived about the battle in Matruh. All of a sudden, it was reported that infiltrations had been verified to the south of Italo-German positions, some of which could have troublesome consequences, but Rommel was not impressed and continued. The enemy did not have forces other than those at hand, with which they would only be able to guard eighty kilometres of Nile. *"For now"*, he asserted, *"I will arrive at El Alamein, but the objective is another: Alexandria, Cairo, and the Nile. If the army is able to overcome the El Alamein gap, something in which I feel confident, then I will be in Cairo on 30 June"*. Then, outlining a smile, he added, *"I'll wait for you there. We'll be able to talk with greater ease"*.

Bastico, to the best of his memory, listened in silence to this sort of sermon and occasionally turned looks of dismay to Cavallero and Kesselring *"who had assumed the impenetrable attitudes of statues. Not a muscle on their faces moved"*. At the end of Rommel's monologue, Cavallero pulled Bastico aside and asked his opinion of the operational plan which had been outlined and demonstrated with much emphasis by the new field marshal.

"New opinions, not a single one", answered the high commander, *"You already know my opinion and I insist on it. Moreover, Rommel himself knows it. We would need to halt the bulk of the forces on the Halfaya pass, organize our defences there and reorganize ourselves. We can occupy Sidi el Barrani and Marsa Matruh creating a big strongpoint at Giarabub for the far protection of the right flank and carry out hasty offensive raids with armoured units from these positions. When our forces are completely reorganized, we resume the offensive, attack again and overrun El Alamein.*

But now it's too late to change the program. Rommel's plan rests on such an optimistic conception of the situation that he won't allow it to be discussed. God be with us!"

Cavallero "*did not even breathe*" and Kesselring limited himself to drawing the attention to the redeployment of *Luftwaffe* units, obtaining promises from both Rommel and Cavallero of their full commitment in these regards. After which *"I shall have von Rintelen read the directives n.31300 of the High Command in German. General Bastico gives a copy of it to Rommel"* is written in Cavallero's diary, at the end of the meeting[32].

The absurdity of such behaviour cannot be denied. Rommel announces providing for the conquest to Cairo or Alexandria in the next four days and Cavallero, who delivers him the orders of the Duce *"to subordinate further advance of the forces beyond El Alamein to the comprehensive situation in the Mediterranean"*, did not say a word! It is not understood what stirred in Cavallero's mind. Not having brought the directives personally signed by Mussolini with him to Africa, why did he hurry to draw them up the evening of the 25th in order to have them delivered to Bastico on the 26th at 9:00 for his signature (even if it was an order), before even hearing Rommel's operational plan? And why keep them and present them to Rommel at the end of the Sidi el Barrani meeting, knowing that he proposed to move to Cairo or at least Alexandria in four days? Let's see what was reported to Mussolini that same evening:

> "(...) From an initial brief examination it appears that the logistical situation allows to continue the advance even if with serious difficulties which appear surmountable.
>
> (...) This premised, I must inform you, Duce, that I have found a delicate situation here due to a deep disagreement between Rommel and Kesselring, this also reflects on personal relationships, which brought Kesselring to a rather pessimistic judgement of the situation as also regards the Mediterranean. Having determined the psychological basis for this disagreement, I was able to correct Kesselring's direction yesterday so that the dissent could be composed in the meeting with Rommel this morning. Where the African theatre of operations is con-

[32] No minutes exist for the meeting. It was reconstructed on the basis of what was remembered by Bastico (no. 20 of the weekly *Tempo*, from 9/12/1958, pp. 26-29) and from a summary appearing in Cavallero's diary.

cerned it was of consequence to assure tight coordination of the advance between land and air components. There was also disagreement on this point which was settled on the basis of your directives that I communicated to *Superasi* and illustrated to Rommel and Kesselring, Bastico and Fougier present, and so a perfect agreement was reached on them.

To sum up:

1. fully exploit the successes obtained up to now;
2. continue advance with greatest possible speed and all available forces reaching the gap between the Gulf of Arabia and the Qattara Depression as the first objective, after the destruction of the defence of Marsa Matruh and Baggush; this line will serve as a starting base for further advances;
3. (...).
4. Mediterranean situation is at the base of all problems; OBS and High Command of Air Force *(Superaereo)* will take up pressure on Malta again as soon as possible; in the meantime transports across the Mediterranean will adhere to the size and means that were determined in Rome and of which I here give news.

(...) Attack on Marsa Matruh positions took place this afternoon. We'll have news tomorrow"[34].

The *"perfect agreement"* would not have appeared to be that at all, had the three communications not finally revealed a change in Cavallero's opinion. He telegraphed General Magli of the Supreme Command the *nulla osta* (clearance) for Mussolini to come to Africa as soon as he returned to Derna[35] and the next morning he telegraphed again to suggest that the Duce issue guidelines regarding the behaviour of Italian commands towards the population and *"eventually towards Egyptian authorities"*[36]. Then he secured new directives, always on behalf of the Duce, for Bastico:

"The continuation of operations from the Gulf of Arabia-El Qattara departure base, after the enemy forces that are still fighting our advance have been defeated, is conceived as follows:

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[33] Cavallero's diary.

[34] DSCS, telegram 31303/Op. dated 26/6/1942, 19:00 hours, transmitted at 23:29 and decoded in Rome on the 27th at 2:00.

[35] DSCS, telegram 31301/Op. dated 26/6/1942, 18:10 hours: "*For General Magli - Tevere*".

[36] DSCS, telegram 31306/Op. dated 27/6/1942.

1. Suez Canal objective, aiming for Suez and Ismailia; from Ismailia to Port Said as soon as possible. Tasks: block the canal and prevent the flow of reinforcements to the Middle East;
2. presupposition of this advance is that the occupation of Cairo is assured, and the southern flank secured (including the airports).
3. also secure northern flank to block threats from Alexandria, in order to guarantee it will not be possible to occupy the stronghold from that direction;
4. guarantee our back against sea landing, keeping the main points of the coast garrisoned and keeping a sufficient mobile force at hand to hasten to eventually threatened areas;
5. the Duce would rather that Italian and German forces be equally represented in the advance to the Canal.

The guidelines for the behaviour of military commands towards authorities and populations of Egypt will be communicated as soon as possible"[37].

In other words, complete adherence to Rommel's plan, more or less, notwithstanding the Mediterranean, Malta and diesel. To speak of an unjustified turnabout is perhaps hypercritical, but the fact that a psychological abandonment to the flattering vision of a clamorous triumphal entrance into Alexandria and Cairo occurred is undeniable. The calculation of the distances on the map and the illusion that the enemy was irreparably defeated was too alluring. We will come back to this crucial moment in time, but in the meantime the first disappointment arrived from the OKW. The requests for 40,000 tons of diesel for the Italian Navy and 10,000 tons of fuel for the Italian Air Force could not be granted. The *Luftwaffe* and the *Kriegsmarine* were also insufficiently supplied, hence, *"as far as Germany is concerned all possibilities for aid have been exhausted. The support of Romanian supplies only remains, the providing of which I will not cease to take an interest for you"*, concluded Keitel[38]. It was necessary to make do with what existed.

In those days Cavallero's particular attention was committed to bringing efficiency back to the port of Tobruk, but he also found a way to define an important controversy. Terms were needed for the war spoils. The agreement with the OKW established that the material captured in Russia was considered German property and what was seized in Africa was Italian property. Nevertheless, it was agreed that troops could utilize

[37] DSCS, f. 31307/Op. 27/6/1942.

[38] Cavallero's diary, letter dated 25/6/1942 from Marshal Keitel.

urgently needed arms and materials immediately for the purpose of combat, barring the next delivery to the areas of those in charge. On the basis of these agreements, in Northern Africa the management of the warehouses and holds should have been assumed by the North Africa Logistic Headquarters which would provide for the regulation and distribution to Italian and German corps and divisions without delay.

Matruh fell on 29 June. That morning another high level meeting was held at Fonte Mara (west of Derna), High Command tactical headquarters. Kesselring reported that Rommel intended to use two days for re-organizing his forces, especially the armoured ones, and then attack El Alamein gap, with the main effort to the left rather than the right. After the breakthrough at El Alamein, (a unanimous certainty lingered on this) the task of the 5th Air Squadron and of the *Fliegerführer* was to defeat the retreating enemy troops. He added, more optimistically that some days before, with the received reinforcements he hoped to be able to immediately assure greater protection for the convoys. Furthermore, thanks to a new group of transports that was sent to him, he expected to bring 800-1,000 men a day up to Sidi el Barrani or even deeper, while the Italian S.82 cargo aircraft would provide for Italian personnel.

In connection with what Kesselring indicated, Cavallero saw to the drawing up of guidelines for behaviour towards Egypt (rather obvious) and about the use of aviation[40].

At 19:45 Mussolini landed in Derna.

2. The British Operational Problem

Just before midnight 20 June, Gen. Ritchie (8th Army Commander) warned General Auchinleck, Commander in Chief for the Middle East, that he considered Tobruk's fate sealed and that considering the foreseeable sum of war spoils, Rommel would be in a position to retake the advance immediately towards east. On the other hand, the limited availability of armoured units would not allow him to hope for a prolonged defence of the border line, therefore *"I believe we can only gain time with a delaying manoeuvre"* and proposed the abandonment of border positions to immediately gain space.

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[39] DSCS, f. 31310/Op. dated 28/6/1942.

[40] DSCS, f. 31316/Op. dated 29/6/1942.

It was clear that things were definitely compromised for the stronghold. In fact, at about 8:00, the following morning news arrived that the Command of the 2nd South African Division had been overwhelmed. At this point Ritchie decided to communicate the decisions made to face the events to Cairo. He would defend Matruh with the New Zealand Division that was flowing in from Syria and with a Brigade from the 5th Indian Division; the 50th British Division drawn up to the left of the entrenched field, the 10th Indian Division at Maaten Baggush and the 1st South African Division to the rear and with some forces guarding the El Alamein gap. The armoured units, then being reorganized, would be placed to the east of this last position. "*In my opinion and also in Gott's,* "he added, *"the 1st South African Division needs some time to reorganize itself for the moment and is not in a condition to face serious battle"*[41].

In light of these proposals, the Committee for the Defence of the Middle East transmitted a long detailed examination of the situation to London and to Washington. The relation to the enemy forces seemed favourable on the air field[42], but not so much on the battlefield. Rommel had acquired superiority in all sectors and was abundantly supplied with means of transport. In defence the 8th Army had three and a half divisions available with little artillery; three tank regiments, two of which were poorly trained and one mixed; two motorized brigades and four regiments of armoured cars. The New Zealand division was arriving at Matruh.

The foreseen plan to defend the border was based on the resistance of a certain number of *boxes*, or in other words, brigade strongholds, and on the quick reaction of a large armoured reserve. Since this did not exist, the strongholds risked being eliminated one after another. East of the border, there were no natural or artificial obstacles to support a defensive organization up to Matruh. There an entrenched field had already been fitted out for an infantry division and another position more south, Sidi Hamza, planned but never arranged. Between the two places there were many minefields. It is also true that a strong armoured reserve was considered necessary on this line; however, lacking this, infantry units could be used to cover with fire and increase the defensive value of the minefields. On the other hand, with Rommel's rapidity of movement in mind, there were

[41] The judgement echoed the numerous difficulties placed before General Gott by General Pienaar about the tasks assigned by the 13th Corps to the 1st South African.

[42] The Desert Air Force numbered 463 efficient planes and the Royal Air Force had another 420 craft at its disposal in the Middle East.

still 200 kilometres of desert that represented a tangible obstacle to the advance, and that could be easily increased much more by the intervention of the *Desert Air Force*. In short, it seemed logical to keep the enemy at the border with entirely mobile troops to guarantee the retreat of most of the 8th Army on Matruh and to allow for the preparation of an attack force capable of retaking the initiative.

With this in mind, the orders issued regarded the conservation of border positions above all and for the longest possible time with mechanized forces and well-equipped with artillery with the aim of imposing the maximum delay on the German-Italian forces, not to mention retaining the forward landing strips and airfields west of Matruh as long as possible. This task would be supported by intense *Desert Air Force* air activity and putting demolitions into effect on the entire border zone.

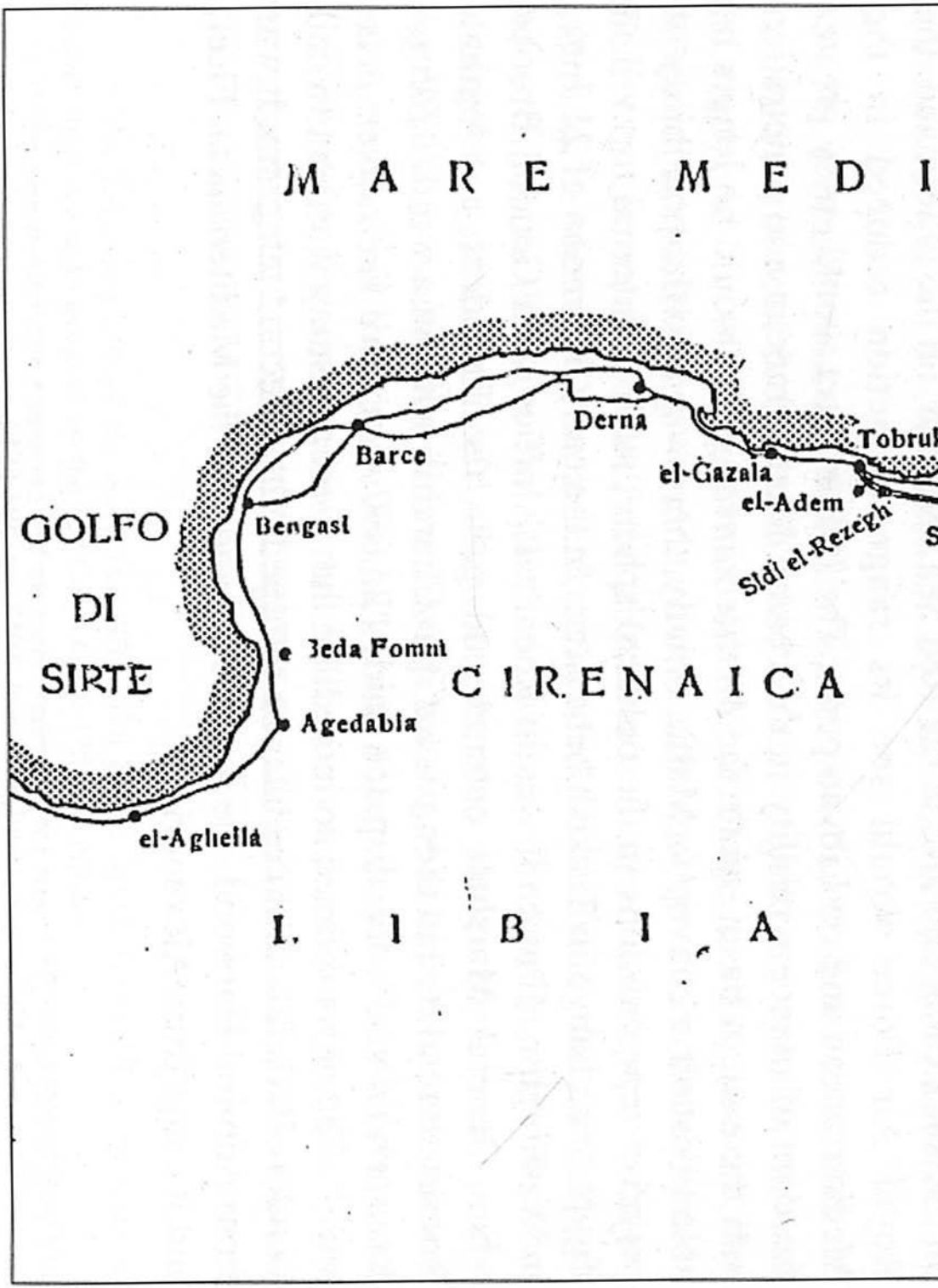
With regards to the position of Matruh, which represented the rally area for the 8th Army in retreat, it would also have to include the area to the south of the entrenched field. Other orders concerned the transfer of every depot and warehouse to the east of Matruh and the quick organization of an attack force[43].

Of course - the assessment continued - the retreat to Matruh brought inconveniences with it that should not be underestimated. Axis air formations would have a greater potential for airstrikes and raids on the Delta, on the Suez canal and also in the Red Sea zone but, on the other hand, the Royal Air Force would see its range of action reduced in the Mediterranean and on Libyan ports. The Italian Fleet would enjoy greater freedom of manoeuvrability in the central Mediterranean and penetration into the eastern basin, while the *Mediterranean Fleet* would no longer be able to escort a convoy to Malta. Finally, there was also the possibility of negative repercussions in the political sphere, such as internal turmoil in Egypt or a change in Turkish behaviour. In the early afternoon of 21 June, in Washington, Churchill was in Roosevelt's office with General Brooke when General Marshall entered and gave the President a telegram. Roosevelt read it, and then passed it to Churchill without a word. *"Tobruk has surrendered"*, the dispatch said, *"25,000 men have been taken prisoner"*. The news seemed so incredible that General Ismay was sent to call London, but a few minutes later he returned with a second telegram. It was from Admiral Harwood, the new Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, and it came from Alexandria:

[43] CONNEL J., Auchinleck, London, Cassel, 1957, pp. 594-595.

Sket

"THE LIBYAN-EC



ch N. 3
GYPTIAN SECTOR"

"Tobruk has fallen and the situation has got so much worse that Alexandria can evidently be attacked by aviation in the near future; given the imminent period of the full moon, I'm sending all the units of the eastern Mediterranean fleet south of the Suez Canal to await events. I'm counting on getting the *Queen Elizabeth* out of the basin at the end of this week"[44].

Roosevelt showed a lot of empathy for the disastrous event and asked in what way America could help. Churchill replied, *"Give us all the Sherman tanks you can get together and send them to the Middle East as soon as possible"*. General Marshall then promised he would take 300 *Shermans* (the first produced) and one hundred of 105 mm self-propelled guns from the American armoured divisions to give them to the 8th Army.

In the evening a dispatch from the Committee for the Defence of the Middle East also arrived. At 23:30 Roosevelt met again with the three American Chiefs of Staff and Churchill with Generals Dill, Brooke and Ismay to study the situation and the proposals of the direct commanders in the Middle East. Churchill was not at all satisfied, and given the readiness of the United States to send strong air and land contingents and in particular the 2nd Armoured Division into that theatre of operations, he hurried to answer Auchinleck:

"1. The Imperial General Chief of Staff, Dill and I firmly hope that a strenuous resistance is opposed on the Sollum border line. Special information has highlighted the effort which the enemy was subjected to. Considerable reinforcements are on the way. A week gained could be decisive. We do not know exactly when the New Zealand division will be employed, but we have foreseen that it could happen at the end of the month. The 8th Armoured and the 44th Infantry are on the way and about to arrive. We agree with General Smuts that you can draw freely from the 9th and 10th Armies, since the danger to the north is more remote. You can therefore carry out energetic attacks with the three divisions currently deployed east of the Canal.

2. I was naturally disconcerted by your news. It can be that we need to retreat to the positions where we found ourselves eighteen months ago and have to redo all the work carried out in this time. In any case, I do not believe that the defence of Delta cannot be truly guaranteed and I hope no one has let themselves be influenced by the spectacular hits the

[44] CHURCHILL W., *La Seconda Guerra Mondiale*, Milan, Mondadori, P.IV, I, p. 439.

enemy has inflicted on us. I am certain that your perseverance, resoluteness and usual capacity to face risks, can restabilise the situation, especially keeping in mind the arrival of large reinforcements.
3. Here, in Washington, the President was deeply shocked by what happened. He and other authorities of the United States have proved immediately ready to give us the greatest help. They have authorized me to inform you that the 2nd Armoured Division of the United States, specially trained in the California desert, will leave for Suez around 5 July and should reach you by August. You do not need to send the Indian division and the Indian Armoured Brigade back to India as foreseen. They are also taking other measures, beyond those illustrated in the telegram from the Chiefs of Staff, to divert the planes directed for India to the Libyan theatre (...). I told the Chief of Staff of the Air Force to send you his delivery plan including the four groups of *Halifax*, if he has not already done so.
4. The main thing now is to inspire a firm will to resist in all of your troops and to fight and not to accept the dangerous situation created by Rommel's fist of heavy tanks. Make it so that all of our agencies do their best in these critical days. His Majesty's Government is very ready to share your responsibility in raising the most energetic and bold opposition"[45].

The point of view of the commanders in charge of the Middle East was also little appreciated in London. The Vice Prime Minister, Attlee, replied at midnight of 21 June, saying that the War Cabinet generally approved of the operational direction, but, in his opinion, sufficient weight had not been given to the difficulties the adversary would necessarily encounter if they were forced to mount an attack against the border positions. *"If the fighting at the front were to turn into a simple rearguard action, "Attlee* specified, *"Matruh entrenched field could be rapidly overwhelmed, but if the troops tasked with the defence of the border put up a resolute and determined resistance, you could completely stop the enemy advance, or in the worst case, gain time to put together an armoured attack force capable of offensive action from Matruh"*[46].

On the 22nd Auchinleck went to the 8th Army Headquarters for the third time in ten days. He understood Ritchie's reasons and recognised that only he was in a position to evaluate the necessity to retreat or not, but,

[45] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, pp. 595-596.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 597.

"*there were serious strategic disadvantages to abandoning the border and I did it with grave reluctance*", he later admitted. "*The reason that an armoured force was indispensable for the success of defending border positions was also true in the case of the defence of Matruh, which, due to the features of the coastline could easily remain isolated by a movement carried out on the southern flank*"[47].

When he reached Baggush, Ritchie showed him a map of the situation. On the border Gott's 13th Army Corps was arranged with five armoured car regiments on the whole front, the 10th Indian Division in Sollum-Halfaya stronghold and the 7th Armoured Division to the southeast of Sidi Omar. The remnants of the 50th Division were gathered at Bug Bug. The 1st South African Division, on the other hand, kept the ridge gaps with the 2nd Brigade, while the 3rd was on its way to El Alamein and the 1st, still at *Kennels Box* by Sidi Hamza, prepared to follow it. In particular, the 7th Armoured Division was made up of the 4th Armoured Brigade (two regiments with seventy tanks altogether) and the 22nd (with a single regiment of twenty-two tanks), the 7th Motor Brigade over four battalions and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade. All counted, Auchinleck was satisfied. When he called Corbett, his Chief of Staff in Cairo, Gott had received orders to "*impose the greatest delay on the enemy*".

It is of use to add that just that morning *Ultra* had deciphered an *Enigma* message from Kesselring to Goering, from which it was evident that Rommel and Kesselring had decided to attack the positions at Sollum, Halfaya and Maddalena on 24 June and Rommel intended to engage the border strongholds with the infantry while the DAK would operate a large enveloping movement from the south. Furthermore, Kesselring had specified he would take his time to transfer the conceded reinforcements to the *Fliegerführer* in Sicily starting 26 June, both because communications across the Mediterranean remained difficult and in order to reorganize the *Luftwaffe* forces in view of future operations[48]. All of this made one think that Rommel would stop for a few days after the action at the border; because of this the idea of retreating the majority of the 8th on Matruh took on a certain validity as it could prepare for battle there. It is a fact that at the first sight of German reconnaissance in Bardia and northwest of

[47] AUCHINLECK C., *Operations in the Middle East from 1st November 1941 to 15th August 1942*, *Dispatch* published as a supplement to *The London Gazette* from 13/1/1948, p. 362.

[48] HINSLEY F.H., *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol. II, London, H.M.S.W.O., 1981, p. 389.

Sollum, Ritchie authorized the retreat of the infantry. Then, in the evening of 22nd, the 10th Indian Division and the 50th British began to withdraw their positions and the 1st South African Brigade abandoned *Kennels Box*.

The rearguard movement of the infantry units was completed on 23 June and in the evening the two armoured brigades of the 7th Armoured also received orders to move to Matruh. Only the 7th Motor Brigade, the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade and the 4th South African Lorry Regiment stayed to face the initial Italo-German manoeuvre.

In the meantime, in the afternoon, the Committee for the Defence of the Middle East had answered Attlee and the rather controversial communication was repeated to Churchill:

> "We are all too aware of how desirable it is to keep the enemy on the border positions and we will not give them up easily.
> However, it is necessary to understand the real value of such a defence in the current circumstances. We are dealing with two main strongholds earmarked to be kept by infantry and artillery with the support of an armoured reserve of suitable importance to face an attack of tanks outflanking the southern side or penetrating the interval, thirty miles wide, that exists between the above mentioned defensive structures. We *do not* have the minimum of armoured units necessary to accomplish this task. Given this shortage, nothing can stop the enemy from isolating the strongholds and destroying them one by one. Consequently, an insufficient number of troops would remain to defend the entrenched field of Matruh, and so it would be overwhelmed in a short time. The Matruh stronghold requires an armoured reserve equal in strength to the one necessary for the border.
> We need time to organize an armoured attack force and, in the meanwhile, conserve our efficiency and protect Egypt. This time can only be gained by increasing the distance the enemy must cover to come into contact with the majority of our forces. We therefore intend:
>
> a. to utilize to the maximum extent the defensive structures and border minefields manned with mobile units equipped with massive artillery and heavily supported from the air. These can delay and wear out the enemy without being surrounded and eliminated.
> b. to make an armoured reserve ready and prepare a defensive-offensive battle in the Matruh zone with the aim of blocking the enemy west of Matruh, even if they proceed in force.
>
> This line of conduct deprives the enemy of their tank superiority in the decisive operation which he hopes to develop at the border and forces

him to face the formidable problem of invading Egypt with the majority of the troops across 120 miles of terrain without water existing between the border and Matruh.

A decisive battle in the Matruh zone can therefore be fought with better conditions for us. But as soon as we are ready for the offensive, the bulk of the 8th Army will get closer to the border again.

We propose that you invite General Galloway of the General Staff to explain to you the effects at the strategic and tactical level of the nearly complete lack of obstacles to the movement of vehicles in the western desert, and of the consequent freedom of movement guaranteed to the army which is superior in terms of armoured troops, notwithstanding how strong or well-entrenched the infantry of the opposing side may be"[49].

The picture was pertinent, even if stinging. And - let it be allowed to add - it is strange that the real and concrete validity of this last paragraph was not used by friends and enemies to explain *ad abundantiam* the disaster of the 10th Italian Army at Sidi el Barrani in December of 1940! Without, of course, detracting from General O'Connor's merits.

Auchinleck returned to Cairo the evening of the 22nd. He was aware of the necessity for changes in the chain of command. He pointed to himself first. The morning of the 23rd, he addressed a calm, honest telegram to Brooke, worthy of a soldier of high moral stature:

"The unfavourable progress of the recent battle in Cirenaica, culminating in the disastrous fall of Tobruk, leads me to ask you to seriously consider whether (or not) to keep me in charge. I do not doubt that you are already weighing this consideration and I find it more than fair, but I would like you to know that I am also aware of the effects that can come from the fighting in the last few months.

Personally, I feel able to continue and have faith in my ability to turn the situation around before long. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, in situations like the current one, fresh blood and new ideas can make the difference between success and stalemate (...). After you ponder for months, day and night, over a given problem, you may come to fossilization and loss of originality. In this theatre originality is essential and it is probable that a change is desirable for this reason alone, apart

[49] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, pp. 597-598. General Gallway was called back to London from the Middle East to assume a Staff post at the War Office.

from any other consideration, such as the loss of prestige coming from failure, the lack of good fortune and all the other factors that dip into an army's morale.

It came to mind that you could bring in Alexander, who could be here in a day or two. Personally, I don't think Wilson could take over now, but he would be suitable. I have thought this over a lot and feel it necessary to express my opinion"[50].

In any case, some heads started to fall. Rees, commander of the 10th Indian Division, was replaced by General Nichols[51], and Messervy by General Renton.

In the morning of 24 June it was time for a personal letter to Churchill. Auchinleck wrote it calmly, essentially to respond to a telegram sent to him by the Premier. He expressed regret for the capitulation of Tobruk and the defeat suffered by the 8th Army and picked up the subject of the Sollum and Sidi Omar strongholds, already mentioned in the preceding dispatch. He then went on to give some details about the arrangement of the Matruh entrenched field. He could count on the 50th Division, (two Brigades) on the 5th and 10th Indian Divisions, (three Brigades each) and the New Zealand Division, (fully operational) not to mention the 1st, 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions according to the availability of tanks. The 8th Armoured Division would enter in line in due time after suitable training in desert terrain combat. *"It is my firm intention"*, he promised, *"to take the offensive up again as soon as our armoured units are strong enough to have a reasonable probability of success"*.

He had taken away, he continued, two divisions from the 9th Army and a third from the 10th, plus a corps Hq, signal units, two armoured car regiments, one medium artillery, two field and two anti-tank regiments. Without taking into account the French, Polish, Greek and Trans-Jordan

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 608-609.

[51] On 21 June Gott had called Rees to tell him to keep the Sollum stronghold for three days. The latter replied that the division was in shambles and that, also having considered the state of the stronghold's defensive preparations, he had many and well-founded doubts about being able to fulfil the task. Gott hung up the telephone without a reply and showed up at Sollum six hours later. Furious, he handed a piece of paper to Rees and induced him to read it. Rees, flabbergasted, read that, in Gott's opinion, he did not possess the firmness required by the circumstances and, therefore, had to immediately cede command. Since, obviously, a corps commander did not have the authority to exonerate a divisional on the spot; it went before Auchinleck, who had to uphold Gott, though having a high opinion of Rees. He was put in command of all the defence of the Cairo zone (J. CONNEL, *op. cit.*, p. 610).

contingents, not yet equipped or trained, two Indian divisions, an Indian Armoured Brigade, an Indian armoured car regiment and the 9th Australian Division were staged in the eastern sector of the theatre of operations. He was aware of the risk he took since neither Syria, Iraq, nor Persia could be considered calm areas. However, he did not think the situation in Egypt would require other infantry units and no other armoured units were available from the fronts of the 9th and 10th Armies.

In any case, the news he was given made the situation acceptable. The 2nd American Armoured Division constituted an extremely appreciated reinforcement, as did the *Halifax* bomber groups, equally the *Grant* tanks and the planes diverted from India. Moreover, not having to send back large Indian units as previously foreseen allowed him to look at the problems of internal security in Iraq and Persia with faith, especially in the oil field areas. He did not fear a fall in morale where the troops were concerned or for warfighting training either. He was recovering lost time, but there was still much to do above all for tank and artillery crews, without which the infantry could not be engaged effectively. They needed medium American tanks to be able to compete with the *Panzer* and not the *Crusader* armed with 2-pounder guns. Naturally, if the latter were equipped with 6-pounder guns, it would be adequate too. About recent turnovers, "*I accept full responsibility for them*", Auchinleck concluded[52].

The letter does not mention two problems that agitated the spirit of the head commander in those forty-eight hours. The first regarded the battle on the positions of Matruh, the other Ritchie himself. They were in some ways tied to each other. When Ritchie had proposed to resolve the conflict supported by the Matruh entrenched camp, Auchinleck had agreed and in turn expressed this to the War Cabinet and to Churchill. However, he did not hide the consequences of a defeat from himself. The last units in a condition to fight in 8th Army lines would be liquefied, without any possibility of being replaced. It would have been the end of the campaign in Egypt and the Middle East. It would have been the beginning of profound military-political upheavals, to begin with a possible Turkish intervention alongside the Axis. All would have been decided in the single battle of Matruh. And Ritchie would have lost this battle, he was certain. *"So I decided"*, he wrote later, *"that I could not run the risk of being nailed to Matruh"*[53]. The alternative was El Alamein, where Norrie was organising

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] AUCHINLECK C., Dispatch cit., p. 328.

a resistance with the Command of the 30th. The gap between the sea and the Qattara Depression offered better conditions for defence and a bit of time would be gained for good use in reorganizing the army, which it definitely needed[54], and the arrival of reinforcements. Rommel on the other hand would see a terrible stretching of his logistic lines of supply and communications.

Apart from this it was necessary to face the problem of the commander, a delicate problem considering the critical moment that the troops were going through and the difficulty in choosing the right man. Auchinleck felt tied to Ritchie by feelings of respect and also a certain sense of responsibility. But *"the danger of complete catastrophe was too great"*, he concluded, *"to leave the responsibility to a subordinate that for weeks had been submitted to an exceptional stress"*[55]. This same sentiment was expressed by Tedder, who had ample opportunity to observe the 8th Army Headquarters in action. Indeed, by his judgement, not only Ritchie, but his Chief of Staff, Whiteley, should be replaced as both appeared very tired.

Auchinleck, first thought of his own Chief of Staff, Corbett, but was doubtful about the correctness of sending a subordinate to face a possible disaster and Tedder, the Air Marshal, gave the final push: he himself had to take the fate of the army in hand.

The morning of the 25th at 9:05, however, Auchinleck sent a laconic telegram to Brooke:

> "I will take over Ritchie's command this afternoon. I propose giving him temporary leave in Palestine, but I expect he will return home before and will be entrusted with an army corps command or a General Staff position. I think that, though solid and decisive, he tends to move slowly and I fear that the army has lost faith in him in a certain sense. I am employing Dorman Smith as my Chief of Staff, leaving Corbett to represent me at General Headquarters"[56].

At 14:00 Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith got on a plane and passed the time talking about the latest news. Just before departure a long telegram

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[54] *"The 8th Army"*, a witness at Matruh commented, *"reversed back through us, without seeming at all demoralised, exception made for the black South African drivers, but completely disorderly and unorganised. I did not see a single organic combat unit, whether infantry, or armoured or artillery"* (Howard Kippenberger, Infantry Brigadier, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 126-127).

[55] Barnett Correlli, *I generali del deserto*, Milan, Longanesi, 1950, p. 258.

[56] Connel J., *op. cit.*, p. 612.

arrived from Churchill, sent early that morning. In Washington the offers that were made on the spot by the Americans were weighed accordingly and some modifications appeared necessary.

> "I have already communicated", Churchill wrote, "that the President intends to send the 2nd American Armoured Division, which will leave for Suez around 5 July. We think sending this division in the next month will present serious difficulties.
> General Marshall has therefore drafted a proposal that your General Chief of Staff considers even more alluring from your point of view, since it allows you to receive considerable quantities of the most modern materials without affecting the reinforcements that you need to receive from England. We have, therefore, accepted the following proposals: Americans will send 300 *Sherman* (M.4) tanks to the Middle East as soon as possible and 100 105mm. self-propelled howitzers. This equipment will leave for the Suez Canal about 10 July in two naval convoys taken from the Havana sugar traffic, moving at 13 and 15 knots respectively. Their voyage will be expedited with all possible means. A small number of American mechanics will accompany the tanks and the self propelled artillery.
> Do not have the slightest worry about the development of events in the homeland. Any opinion I may have about how the battle was fought or the moment in which it should have been fought, you have my full faith and I completely share in your responsibilities"[57].
> I just showed your letter to the President who was quite moved and intends to come to your aid. The difficulties with transporting the American Armoured Division by sea, which appear considerable, are on their way to being smoothed out. The Americans are also trying to send a great number of a new type of anti-tank rocket-launchers that they have placed a lot of hope in. Meanwhile, you have heard that the American air reinforcements are ready to be sent to the Middle East. We are studying a plan for sending another large batch, possibly hundreds of long range bombers as soon as possible, and speeding up the sending of improved *Grant* tanks. Tomorrow I am going to propose to the President putting an American General at your service, with a place in the Council of the Middle East, with the understanding that he would have a voice for both the American air and land units.

[57] Nevertheless, in the afternoon of the 22nd Churchill had discussed the substitution of Ritchie with Brooke. *"I knew that from one moment to the next this would have happened and so I was prepared"*, wrote Brooke in his diary and for the moment it remained in suspense (A. BRYANT, *op. cit.*, p. 388).

> Please tell Harwood that I am rather worried about the reports on excessive discouragement and panic dominating in Alexandria and for the fact that the Navy is quickening a retreat to the Red Sea. Although some precautions should be taken and although the *Queen Elizabeth* needs to leave the port as soon as possible, I think it is necessary to keep a firm and confident attitude. The information the President has received from Rome lets one suppose that Rommel counts on losing three or four weeks in order to organize a violent attack against the Marsa Matruh positions. It is my opinion that the delay could be much longer.
> I hope the crisis makes it so that all the personnel in uniform and officials in the services are brought to the highest level of combat preparation. You have a force of more than 700,000 men in the Middle East. Every man fit for combat should be put in the condition to fight and be ready to die for victory. There is no reason why the units defending Marsa Matruh should not be reinforced with thousands of officers and enlisted personnel currently posted in the rear area for administrative service to bulk up the battalions or engineer units. You find yourselves in the same kind of situation that we would find ourselves in if England were invaded. The same indomitable spirit must reign"[58].

The news of most immediate interest was the information that Rommel would not attack for another three or four weeks, if not more. If it were true, the horizon would have colours less dark than it seemed. The decision was firm, at that point, not to bet everything on the Matruh card, and time would not be lacking for bringing the army to El Alamein, reorganizing it there, and reinforcing the units with repaired tanks, employing the 9th Australian Division and preparing new airfields for the Royal Air Force.

Besides, between the 23rd and 24th the decoding of other *Enigma* messages provided new indications: possibly, Rommel's advance would not pause at the border; the Tobruk spoils were considerable; the *Panzerarmee* had asked for topographical maps of Matruh and Alexandria; the Germans came to know that, according to the American Military Attaché in Cairo, the 8th Army had been defeated in a decisive way and that this was the most suitable moment for Rommel's penetration up to Delta.

The plane landed in Maaten Baggush at about dusk. Tedder's aircraft was still on the runway, which, as agreed, had preceded the Commander

[58] The letter is reported with different omissions from J. CONNEL (*op. cit.*, pp. 600-601) and from W. CHURCHILL (*op. cit.*, pp. 446-447). Here it is reconstructed from a comparison of the two texts.

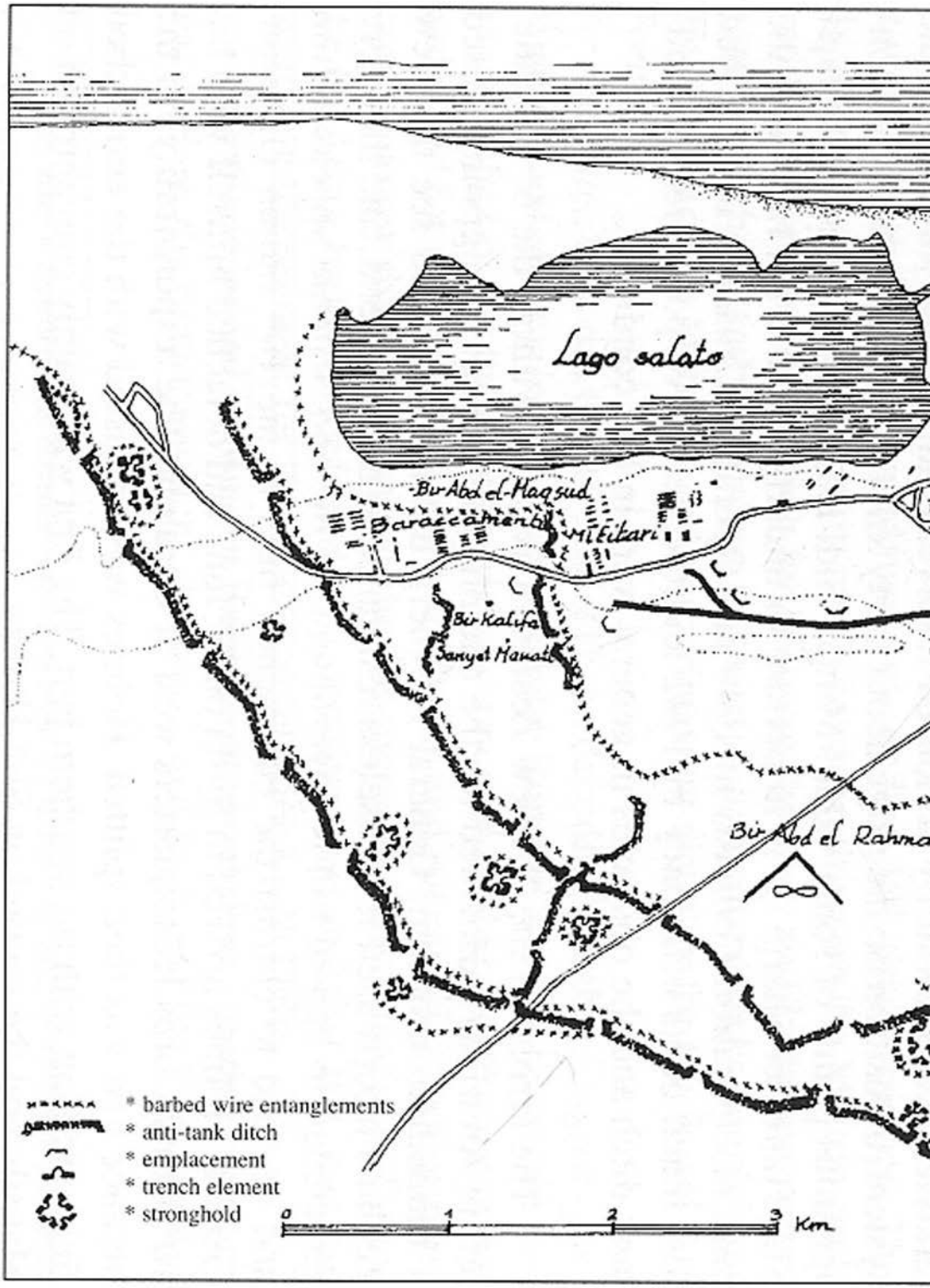
in Chief to anticipate the replacement to Ritchie. The meeting between Auchinleck and Ritchie was not long. At the end, the latter got off his *caravan* and got into a car and drove away towards Cairo alone.

Auchinleck started to study the deployment of the 8th Army, a deployment that was still on its way to being defined. The entrenched field had a perimeter of about 20 kilometres and an average depth of about four kilometres (Sketch N. 4).

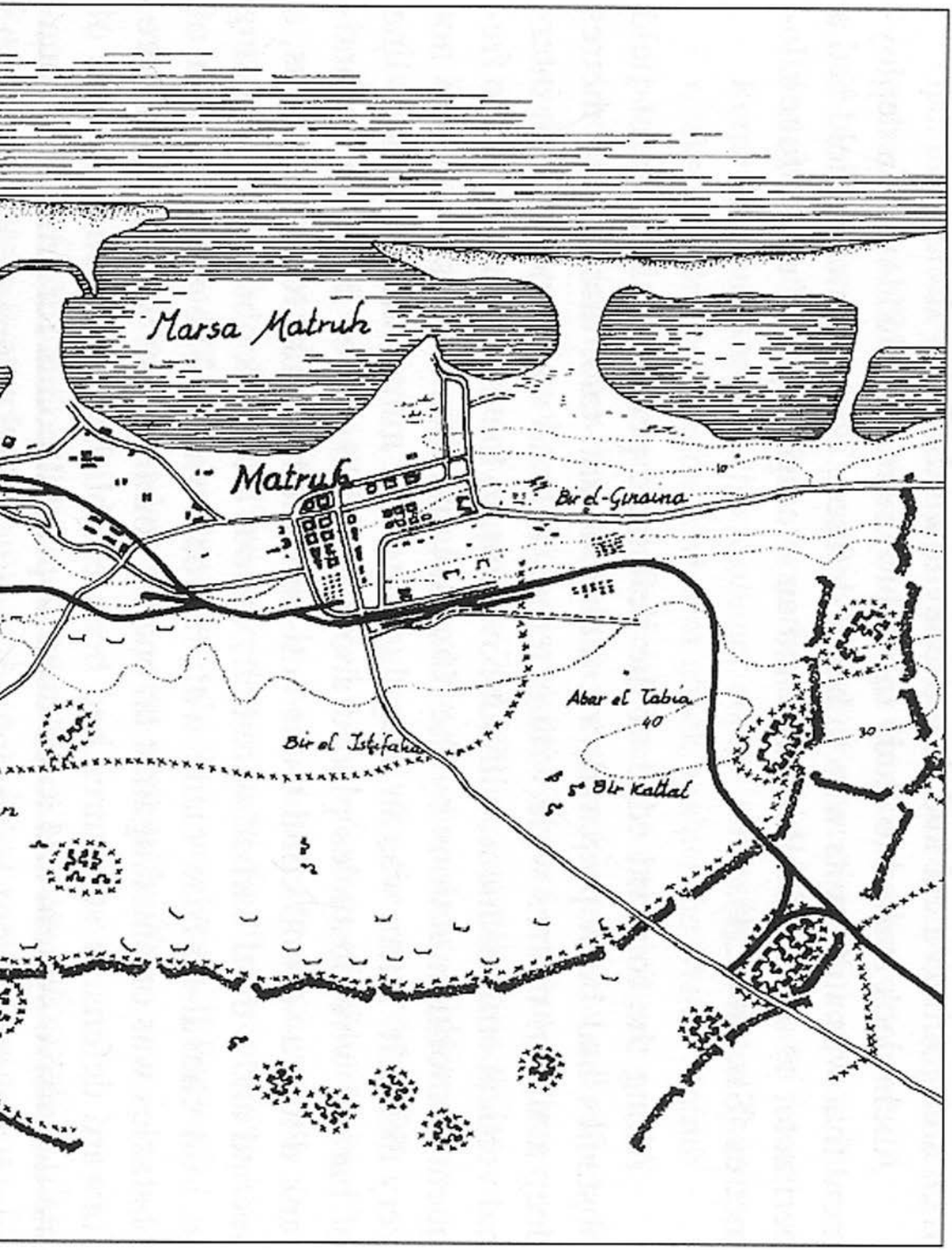
Along the forward edge of the defensive perimeter a series of field obstacles had been prepared, a continuous anti-tank ditch, three metres deep and four metres wide with external inclined walls and with an internal vertical embankment, without covering, so the ditch was subject to frequent demolition actions by the *Khamsin* and thus trespassing it was not very difficult. There was an irregular pattern of mined strips, a broken line of barbed wire obstacles placed about 50 / 100 metres far from the anti-tank ditch, a second continuous anti-tank ditch similar to the previous, a second and a third barbed wire belt, various anti-tank obstacles consisting in iron cheval-de-frise made with railroad tracks. The entire system of obstacles was oriented against an enemy coming from west. Furthermore, forward defensive structures had been established to widen the range of the defensive system and to be used as pivotal points for armoured counterattacks carried out by armoured reserves. Sidi Hamza was part of the system, a position on the ridge about thirty kilometres south, with two conspicuous points of some value: Minqar Sidi Hamza el Gharbi and Minqar Sidi Hanza el Shargi. It is important to underline that what had been the base of Operation *Compass* in 1940 and Operation *Crusader* in 1941 had lost much of its efficiency in 1942 and the defensive positions, the anti-tank ditch and the obstacles in general were in bad condition.

The arrival of the 2nd New Zealand Division (without the 6th Brigade, left in Amiriya) earmarked for the manning of Matruh strongpoint caused a immediate problem. General Freyberg did not intend to see the New Zealand troops used for a useless resistance to the bitter end, and therefore threatened to appeal to his government. In the end, Ritchie appeased him and decided to entrust the entrenched field to the 10th Indian Division. General Holmes arrived in Syria on 23 June and detached himself with his 10th Army Corps Headquarters west of Gerawla. The responsibility for the defence line was then splitted. Holmes was entrusted with the entrenched field and Gott with the southern part. The first was mainly concentrated on Matruh, and the second on Sidi Hamza.

Sketch
"THE MATRUH ENTI



N. 4
RENCHED FIELD"



On 25 June, the army was on its way to complete all the defensive works in a hurry (Sketch N. 5). In 10th Corps sector, the 10th Indian Division was in the Matruh stronghold and the 50th British, reinforced with the 4th South African Armoured Car and the 2nd South African Anti-Tank Artillery, was to the rear near Gerawla. The 13th Corps had the 29th Indian Brigade (the only one remained of the 5th Indian Division) in Sidi Hamza; the 2nd New Zealand in Minqar Qaim, with a battalion in Bir Khalda; the 1st Armoured Division had received the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades and was placed on the ridge, east of the track to Siwa; the 7th Armoured Division was deployed further south with the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade and the 7th Motor Brigade along the track to Siwa.

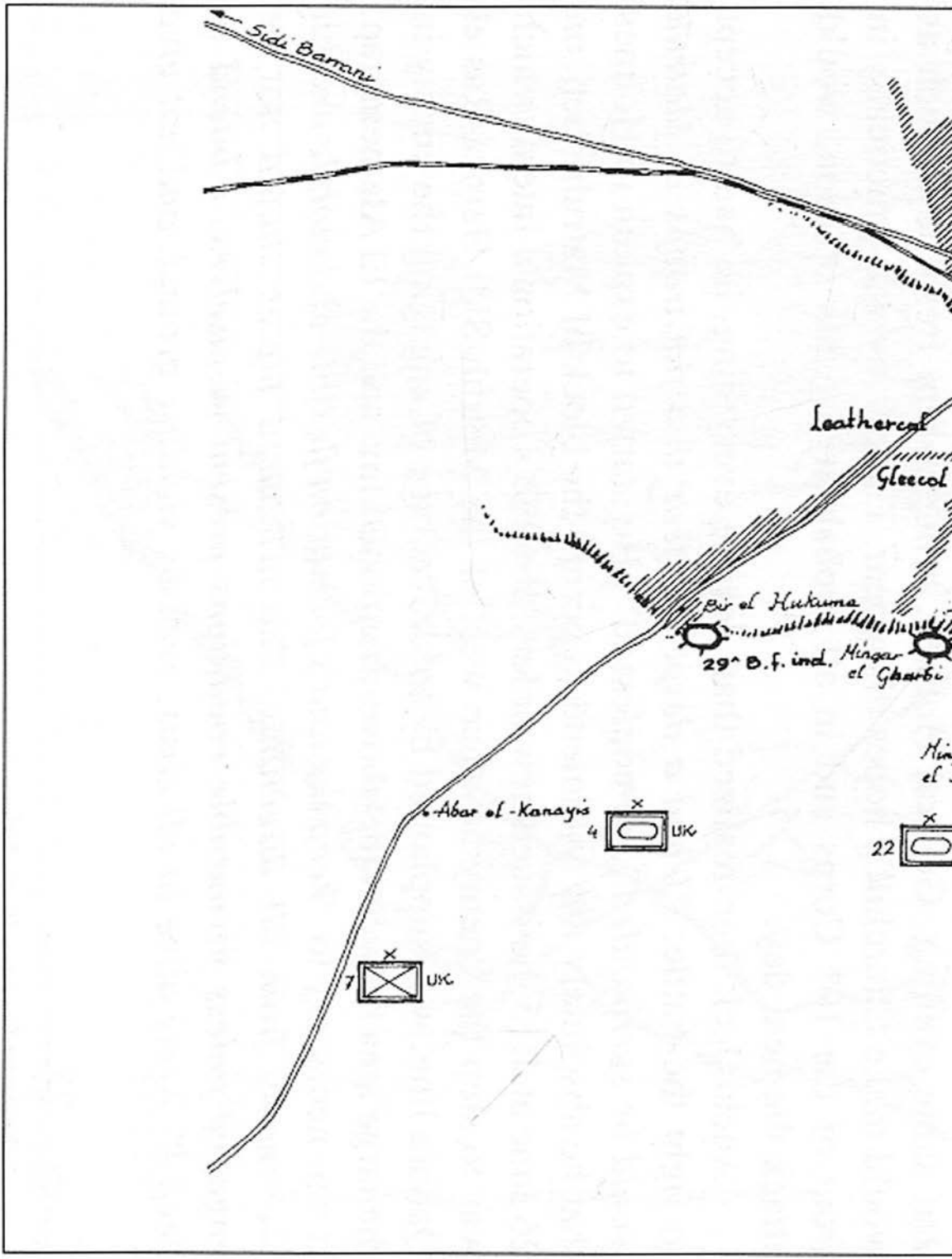
The twenty-kilometre gap between Matruh and the ridge, and thus between the two armoured corps, was covered by two task forces (each one made of an infantry company, a field artillery battery, and an anti-tank section), named *Gleecol* and *Leathercol*, with the task of defending the minefield set up parallel to the track to Siwa. These, in short, were the dispositions found by Auchinleck.

Attlee immediately telegraphed him the full satisfaction of the War Cabinet learning of his decision to take direct command of the army and the conviction that he would know how to stop Rommel in front of Matruh and, in due time, push him back again. But the first visitor of that same evening, General Holmes, brought him fresh news such as would make Churchill's hopes disappear. The enemy was practically in front of the 10th Corps and in all probability, in his opinion, would attack the next day.

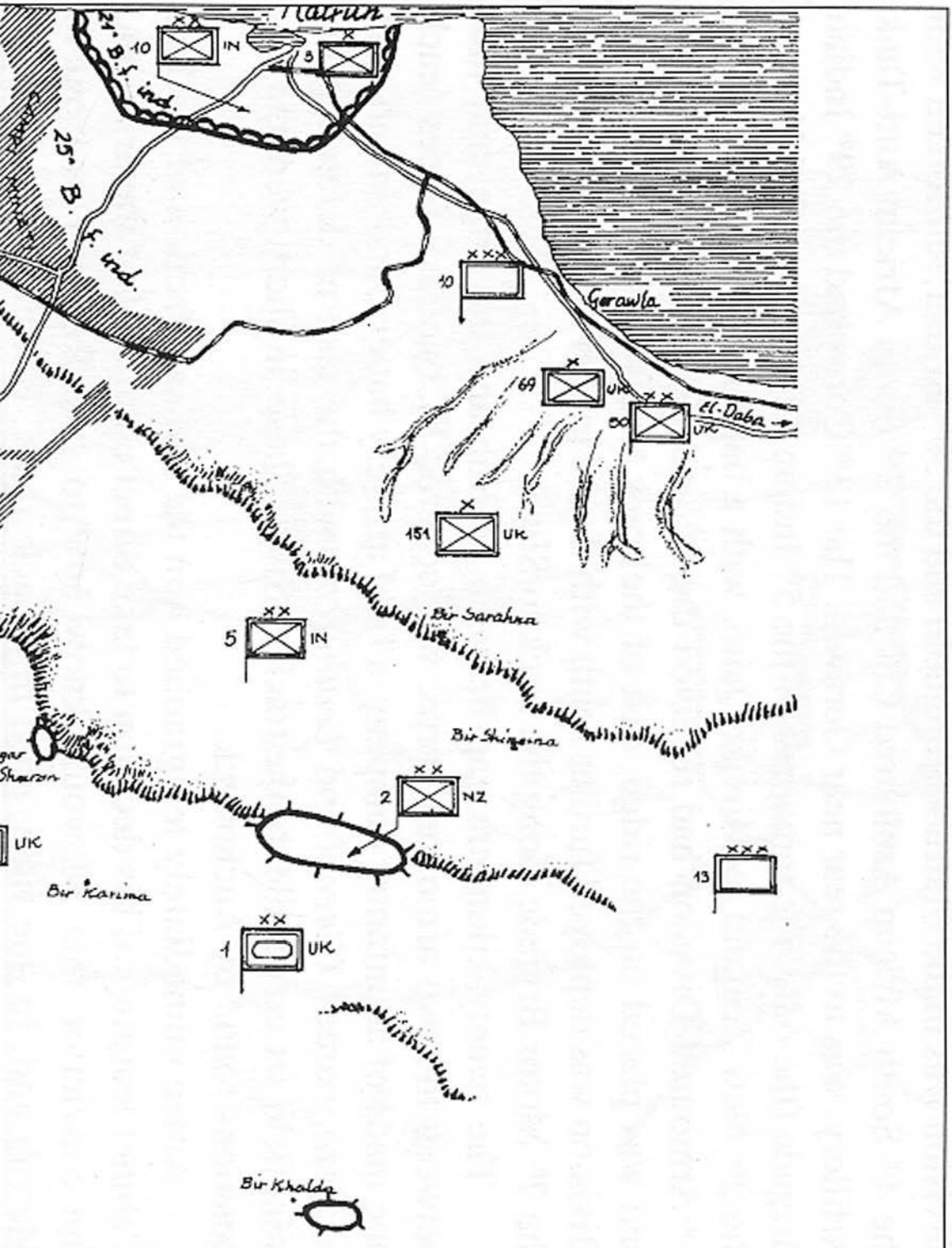
Auchinleck then realized that, despite everything, he had to accept to fight the battle. *"I had a desperate fear that the troops at Matruh would be surrounded"*, he confessed[59]. He started to explain to Holmes that he absolutely did not intend to permit the block of Matruh, then, on 26 June at 4:15, he issued new orders: Ritchie's operational intent, which was to stop the enemy advance west of the Matruh-Sidi Hamza-Ras el Qattara line, was supplanted by the advantage of engaging the enemy in the large area between the above-mentioned line and the El Alamein gap. It was necessary to *"keep the unit's formation flexible and mobile and hit the enemy from all directions. The armoured forces should not be engaged unless favourable conditions present themselves. I intend to keep 8th Army alive at all costs, even by yielding ground, and not give*

[59] BARNETT C., *op. cit.*, p. 265.

Sket
"THE BRITISH FOR



ch N. 5
MATION ON 25 JUNE"



hostages to fortune as static troops in defence of strongholds that can be easily isolated"[60].

He also tried to give tactical direction that would prevent the loss of cohesion that took place in the battle of Ain el Gazala. The enemy had to be immediately shelled by all artillery units of the division closest to the threatened area. Beside this, all other major formations had to quickly concentrate all mobile units to break enemy's attack, obviously though accomplishing the task of defending their assigned front. In short, the coordination of counterattacks was in the hands of the commanders of the army corps. But the coordination and the cooperation between the various branches of services had to acquire striking value also among the army corps, so that *"if an army corps or part of it loses ground, the other should be immediately able to take advantage of the situation attacking the enemy on the flank with speed and decision"*[61].

Moreover, there is a detail for which it is necessary to say a few words. While Tobruk was in agony, Ritchie had decided to employ mobile task groups formed up from various divisions, constituted in such a way as to enhance all the available fire power. The rest of the divisions had to provide for the static defence of the border positions. He lacked the time for the full implementation of this arrangement, however the system was also in use on the Matruh line. Each division had to reorganise itself into tactical groups at the brigade level, composed of artillery units (as the main body) and little infantry units necessary to ensure close defence. In this sense the orders imparted by Ritchie on 22 June were confirmed by Auchinleck, who established that the units not employed for the preparation of the divisional task groups were to be sent to El Alamein. So as it concerned 10th Corps, each division (10th Indian Division and the 50th) took part in the battle with the divisional headquarters, all the divisional artillery, and minor formations taken from infantry brigades. In the 13th Corps, on the other hand, the 29th Brigade was reshuffled as said before, but the 2nd New Zealand Division did not follow the rule. Freyberg objected that any change in unit's structure had to receive the approval of his government. Therefore, he took two Brigades with him and left the third east of El Alamein: as a matter of fact, this brigade had not arrived yet. On 26 June, the 7th Armoured Division sent the 7th Motorized Brigade to the 1st Armoured Division as reinforcement and headed towards El Alamein with the 3rd Indian.

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[60] PLAYFAIR I.S.O., *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, London, H.M.S.O., 1960, vol. III, p. 135.

[61] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

All of this represented a new procedure under the operating profile. The conduct of a retreat manoeuvre was ruled by British doctrine in a different way and based on the principle of avoiding all type of mobile combat. Thus the troops and leaders lacked the slightest training in such a new procedure, nor were many commanders psychologically ready to face combat in similar conditions.

To balance this, the *Desert Air Force* was hitting as hard as it could. The large workshops on the air bases worked hard to repair all the damaged or broken down airplanes quickly, the fighter units tasked for the defence of the Delta and the training units, gave almost all of their planes. Malta sent 20 *Spitfires*. Two groups of *Beaufighters* and another group of *Hurricanes* were taken from Naval Support Wing 201.

But this effort that, as we know, allowed the *Desert Air Force* to reach numerical superiority over the Axis in Africa, was followed by an important technical and tactical decision. All the objectives of western Cirenaica were abandoned and all possible efforts were focused on offensive air support against targets of direct tactical interest for the 8th Army, and the marking of night objectives with flares launched from the navy's *Albacores* was also adopted in the desert. With this new procedure, a couple of hours after coming back from day missions, the night bombers took off with the *Albacores*. Starting 24 June, day and night, airstrikes followed each other along the columns of the Italian Army Corps and the DAK. Kesselring's worries about moving the air bases as soon as possible were well-founded.

In an aside about the ugly moment provoked by the fall of Tobruk in the British camp, it is reputedly interesting to relay the conclusion. The Chief of Imperial General Staff personally sent a very inappropriate telegram to General Corbett on 6 July. The blow suffered and the capture of so many prisoners and materials appeared inexplicable to London and the event was raising doubts and criticism about *"the combative spirit of our commanders"*. Therefore

> "the Cabinet wishes that the Chief of Staff conduct an inquiry and refer the circumstances in which the capitulation took place and in particular the behaviour of the commanding general in the field as soon as possible".

Corbett immediately sent a copy of the dispatch to Auchinleck, who immediately addressed Brooke:

> "I CAN'T believe that the Cabinet ordered my Chief of Staff to report his own opinion on an operation carried out under MY command and I

would appreciate a clear explanation of a request that is highly out of the ordinary.

If the Cabinet wants to send an inquiry commission from Great Britain fine, but charging an official of my General Staff without my consent is intolerable and I am certain that such a thing was NOT intended. I would appreciate receiving instructions directly from you on a subject of such personal importance.

As Corbett has told the Deputy Chief of Imperial Staff, I have already entrusted Wilson with an enquiry into the fall of Tobruk, who is surely a competent judge. I propose no other initiative"[62].

Brooke replied on the 14th stating he was *"very sorry for the misunderstanding"*. There had not been any intention of overstepping him, but simply the desire to not trouble him with these sorts of questions when the operational tasks were so great. Wilson was fine for the inquiry.

3. The Battle of Matruh

The battle of Matruh was rather anomalous. On the one hand, there is an attacker who, without a clear idea of the position and the intentions of the enemy that he intends to destroy, drafts a plan based on little information about enemy's defensive positions to break through and cares little about them. On the other, there is a defender that accepts to fight only because he was not able to leave in time, but that intends to disengage as soon as a favourable opportunity presents itself.

The morning of the 26th the Axis columns were in full movement. Difficulties with orientation and the repeated British air raids day and night had caused complications and confusion, and beyond that losses.

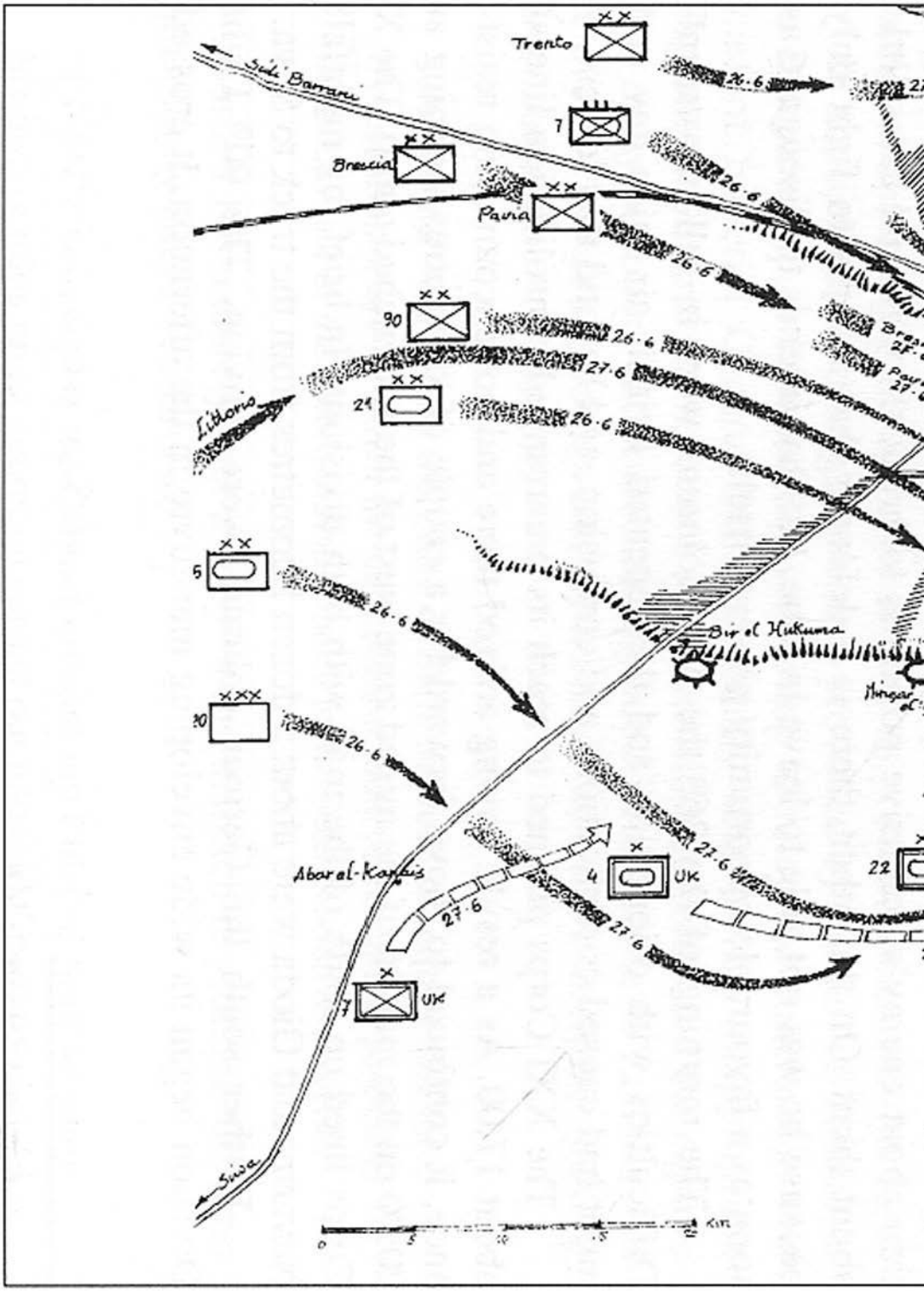
The XXI Corps planned to reach its prearranged consolidation line at about 17:00. As a result, having arrived there and not encountering resistance, it continued to move forward for a couple of kilometres stopping at 20:00 on the margin of the mined zone west of the entrenched camp. The X Corps lined up south of the road with both divisions. In brief, by nightfall Navarini and Gioda were about a dozen kilometres from the track to Siwa.

Further south the German columns were moving. The 90th Light Division began its wide enveloping maneuvre in the afternoon. It crossed

[62] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, p. 670.

Sketc

"THE BATTLE



h N. 6
OF MATRUH"

the minefields and advanced under the fire of 29th Brigade of the 5th Indian Division, and under the bombings of the *Desert Air Force*, but in the end, after many hours, overcame the mined obstacle, destroyed "*Leathercol*" Task Force, taking 400 prisoners and continued further on until midnight. The DAK, which moved at 16:45, also suffered heavy air raids, one of which had procured a number of losses to the Army Corps Headquarters. In its division, the 21st *Panzer* had lost some tanks in the minefields, crossed the track to Siwa at 18:15, compelled " *Gleecol* Task force to flee, but halted at 21:30 when it met a second minefield and came under fire from the defensive position of the 29th Indian Brigade. The 15th *Panzer*, on the other hand, proceeded without encountering any particular resistance and, at dusk, stopped having reached the track to Siwa.

The XX Corps had to advance on the right flank of the DAK, in accordance with the army orders issued at 8:30. It was not saved from the British air attacks either and the losses it suffered were quite important. At about 13:00 the top officers of Corps Headquarters were mortally wounded: General Baldassarre, (who would die at 17:00) General Piacenza and Colonel Raffaelli, Corps' commanding officer and artillery and engineers commanders, respectively. General De Stefanis replaced Baldassarre temporarely and left the *Ariete* to General Arena, the deputy commander. In the late afternoon, the southern wing of the manoeuvring body was so spaced out towards the southwest that it led Rommel to establish that the *Ariete* and the *Littorio* would move sideways northwards to narrow the enveloping movement and use the existing corridors across the minefields. It is not clear what he intended to do, however the order was only accomplished by the *Littorio*, given that in the meantime both the *Ariete* and the *Trieste* had opened a corridor on their own.

In the evening the Axis intelligence service assumed that the 2nd New Zealand Division was at Matruh; the remnants of the 50th Division, the 5th Indian Division, the 1st and the 7th Motor Brigades on the plateau, as a security echelon. It seemed that the 10th Indian Division was placed to the back, in the Baggush stronghold. Rommel, therefore, insisted on the original plan: central advance with the 21st *Panzer*; enveloping movement by the 10th Corps to north with the 90th Light; frontal attack in the south against the 5th Indian Division and the armoured reserve with the 15th *Panzer* and the XX Italian Corps. The target was always Matruh. The two assumed armoured divisions did not worry him much. At most - he thought - they could count on maybe a hundred tanks, most of different types. He was unaware that the first armoured division had put together 159 tanks, among which 60 *Grants*, 80 *Crusaders* and *Stuarts* and 19 *Valentines*.

The advance of the manoeuvring body, that moved with columns marching side by side, was of course noted by the 8th Army, that however, receiving confused reports, remained uncertain for some time of what tactical significance to attribute to Rommel's moves. The first impression given by the elimination of *Leathercol* and *Gleecol* was that the enemy was pushing into the central gap of the British positions, having recognised it. Moreover *Gleecol's* reports talked about a raid of hundreds of *Panzers*, although the report was refuted by the headquarters of the 10th Corps, which denied this news having kept the zone under observation the whole day. In any case, the 29th Indian Brigade was soon disorganised and started to retreat behind the track to Bir Khalda.

The Italo-German Army started moving again at dawn on the 27th (Sketch N. 6). The XXI Corps proceeded slowly due to the lively enemy fire and the depth of the minefields, but at 11:00 the *Trento* came out beyond the passive obstacle and a combat sappers battalion occupied the crossroads with the track to Siwa, called *Charing Cross* by the British. The surrounding also took on consistency thanks to the action of X Corps - which followed the southern edge of the minefields and pushed back a counterattack attempted by the 5th Indian Brigade - and, above all, of the 90th Light. As soon as the X Corps had crossed the southern meridian of Matruh, the 90th Light ran into new resistance, the IX *Durham Light Infantry,* sent against them since the previous night. In a short frontal fight the 90th Light took 300 prisoners and overwhelmed the battalion. Immediately after, however, the Division's headquarters had to report that they were under intense fire not only from east (50th Division), but also from south, that is from Minqar Qaim (2nd New Zealand Division).

A pause took over only to be quickly resolved by the arrival of the 21st *Panzer*, whose entrance in the field had already been detected by the New Zealanders.

"At about 9:00 in the morning of the 27th", wrote General Klippenburger, *"at six or seven miles to the northeast appeared an enormous column of vehicles, sparkling in the haze and led by a group of fifteen tanks"*. Actually von Bismark (21st *Panzer* Commander) had sixteen Pzkw II and five Pzkw II.

The 21st *Panzer*, which Rommel was marching with, then headed towards southeast to Bir Shineina, (about 11 hours) but at this point the real trouble started. To reach the coast the 90th Light had to get past the 151st British Brigade, not anything difficult in itself, but they would have found themselves completely isolated because Gioda's X Corps was still south of *Charing Cross*.

Just before 13:00 Rommel visited the 90th Light Hq; he complimented and urged continuing the advance in order to reach the coast by nightfall. In the meantime he hurried up the arrival of the *Littorio*, that had come close with a night march, to fill the gap with the *Pavia*.

It was a different matter for the 21st *Panzer*. It was lined up to the north of the rocky ridge where the New Zealanders had spent the night working hard and digging trenches, with the 5th Brigade (General Kippenberger) at Minqar Qaim, the 4th Brigade (General Inglis) east of the track to Bir Khalda and the divisional reserve in between, that is astride the track. Seeing the long German column arrive, the New Zealand guns opened fire and a duel quickly burst between artilleries that lasted until Rommel realized that there were more adversaries than he had thought on the Sidi Hamza plateau.

On the other side the 15th *Panzer* also found itself in troubles. It had hurled itself forward, keeping to the south of Sidi Hanza. However, it was soon overtaken by the 4th Armoured Brigade and the 7th Motor Brigade and the 22nd Armoured Brigade and was unable to open the way for itself. After midday Rommel rushed the 21st *Panzer* to attack the Minqar Qaim positions, in order to speed up the entry of the 15th into combat. He then ordered the XX Corps (which proceeded deeply with divisions in echelons protected by the left of the DAK) to pass under tactical control of General Nehring (DAK Commander) *"to clear the area in front of the 15th Panzer and surround the enemy groups"*[63].

Meanwhile, Auchinleck was trying to follow the thread of the battle. It was not easy to identify on the basis of confused and conflicting reports. However, assuming that Rommel had 200 tanks and 30,000 men at his disposal, he communicated to Holmes and Gott at 11:20 that, if necessary, the two corps had to break contact and go back around Fuka meridian where they would be ready to engage battle again.

Even before hearing about Operation *Pike*, (the conventional name given to the movement back to the rear line) Gott, having gone to the headquarters of the 2nd New Zealand Division, at about 11:00 had to tell Freyberg to *"disengage where forced to and to not consider the current positions of vital importance"*[64]. Indeed, in the full spirit of the agreements manifested by Auchinleck in assuming command, he indicated instructions for the possible retreat manoeuvre. At first, the corps had to go to a

[63] Historic diary of the XX Corps message dated 27/6/1942, 13:40 hours, added at 15:00.
[64] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257.

line about fifteen kilometres west of Fuka, then to the El Alamein gap. Each division, protected by its own rearguard, would move along an independent route: the 5th Indian northwards, the 2nd New Zealand to the centre and the 1st Armoured southwards.

At noon he reported to the Army Headquarters his impressions of the visit to the New Zealanders. Taking into consideration the effects of the violent enemy artillery fire, at an advantage due to greater range, and facing an inevitable German attack, he had authorized Freyberg to increase the concentration of his troops. However, he had refused him the reinforcement of a *Valentine* tank unit, intending to keep the armoured forces gathered. Dorman-Smith answered that he would give orders to the 10th Corps to launch a strong raid to south to lighten the pressure on the New Zealanders. In fact, at about 15:00, Holmes, after receiving orders, arranged for the action of the 50th British Division that would move at 17:30.

In the meantime, von Bismark had attacked Minqar Qaim from northeast with a part of the 21st *Panzer* and climbed the ridge with the rest in a wide enveloping movement, then retreated westwards. He soon met up with the echelon of enemy vehicles, overwhelming them and forcing them to flee back to the division and in part look for escape southwards. Then he faced the New Zealand positions. The fight did not bring concrete results. Inglis's 4th Brigade was seriously engaged but stood firmly, also thanks to the many six-pounder guns received in support just that morning[65]. However, at 16:00, Freyberg asked for the intervention of the 1st Armoured Division.

General Lumsden, who had already lost about fifteen tanks, was slowly retreating in front of the 15th *Panzer* and the *Ariete*. At Freyberg's request, he sent the 3rd *County of London Yeomanry*. This unit arrived on the scene in a very confused situation and it found itself cannoned by the New Zealanders. It undoubtedly caused a sudden danger for the 21st *Panzer*, as by lucky chance, the *Queen's Bays* (the third regiment of the 22nd Armoured Brigade) were arriving from the east with 35 tanks. Only by halting and hastily organising in defence and taking advantage, above all, of the complete lack of initiative and coordination in the British camp, was von Bismark able to avert the danger of being hit on both flanks.

Rommel was truly fortunate that day. If Gott had had better perception of how the battle was unfolding, more confidence or, more simply, had not suffered from the undoubted nervous strain, the DAK and the XX

[65] Every New Zealand Battalion had eight 2-pounder guns, which had to be substituted with 6-pounder cannons. According to Kippenberger, precisely that morning of the 27th *"some 6-pounders"* had arrived, insufficient for the total substitution foreseen (*op. cit.* p. 253).

Corps would have been defeated separately and Auchinleck would have soundly turned the situation around. Instead Gott convinced himself in the early afternoon that the German attack at Minqar Qaim would not have been stopped by the New Zealanders, with disastrous consequences for the 13th Corps. With this conviction in mind he said to Lumsden, who would have wanted to bring the 1st Armoured Division closer to better face the Italo-German threat, *"It's over"*, and added, *"the New Zealand Division no longer exists"*[66]. In this same picture, the headquarters of the 13th Corps sent a rather obscure message to the 1st Armoured Division at 16:55, from which it seemed that the New Zealanders had abandoned Minqar Qaim and therefore the division could retreat at its discretion to the east of the track to Bir Khalda. A similar communication, but without a time listed, was also sent to the 2nd New Zealand. *"Both messages"*, Playfair observed, *"are unexplainable and there is no indication of their author, other than the use of the pronoun* I *in each, which would make one think they were compiled by Gott"*[67]. And when Freyberg got into contact with Lumsden, he found out that his unit was about to leave on its own.

This happened while Freyberg was injured. He was replaced by General Inglis, commander of the 4th Brigade. Knowing that Gott had declared the hold of Minqar Qaim was considered non-mandatory, he too decided to retreat at nightfall. So at about 17:00 he asked the 13th Corps to define the area where they needed to move to. The answer indicated (or so at least it was understood) Bab el Qattara, a place thirty kilometres to the southeast of El Alamein, which meant skipping the rest at the height of Fuka.

At almost the same time, Rommel reached the conclusion that the 8th Army was fleeing both because radio interceptions had given a sense of the British intention of abandoning the battlefield and because deceived by the ease with which the 90th Light, the 21st *Panzer* and the *Littorio* had penetrated between Matruh and the Sidi Hamza ridge. At about 17:20, he incited the 90th Light, reduced to 1,600 men, to push at full speed towards the coast and the 21st *Panzer* to *"continue following the enemy towards Fuka in the late evening"*. Nehring, who saw what was amassing on the Sidi Hamza plateau, showed complete scepticism: *"The army corps (...) does not have, however, any doubt that this operation is not possible today because of the enemy situation"*[68]. However, he advised De Stefanis that the 15th *Panzer* would attack there soon and that, for this reason, the *Ariete* had to close in.

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[66] *Ibid.*, p. 255.

[67] PLAYFAIR I.S.O., *op. cit.*, p. 292.

[68] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257.

In El Daba, where the headquarters of the 8th Army had moved, Auchinleck followed the events confusely. He had told London that the overall picture was *"satisfying up to now"*, having confirmed the imminent counterattack of the 10th Corps from Matruh in the southerly direction and of the 7th Motor Brigade against the zones behind the front of the DAK. He also renewed the intention of abandoning Matruh rather than seeing the majority of his remaining troops blocked there. Among other things, his intelligence service overestimated Rommel's forces.

At 19:20, suddenly and of his own initiative, the 13th Corps issued an order in code to its three divisions to start the *first phase* of the retreat, that is the withdrawal back to the Fuka positions of the 5th Indian, the 1st Armoured and the 2nd New Zealand. However, while the first two orders indicated the destination, the one to the New Zealanders was strangely silenced, and so they went towards Bab el Qattara. Then Gott reported the measures taken to the 8th Army Headquarters. Here they were caught off balance because the thrust south prescribed for the 10th Corps was supposed to already be underway and the retreat of the 13th Corps would have seriously compromised the position of the 10th Corps. Dorman-Smith commented: *"It was not planned that they would go (...). The Army Headquarters was very surprised when it found out that the New Zealand Division had retreated. It was also very surprised that the 13th Corps had withdrawn. The 10th Corps was left alone to fight to escape from a very difficult situation"*. And he affirmed, *"The plan was that the 13th Corps would attack to the north and help the other to get by"* and above all that the 13th Corps *"needed to keep the ridge until the departure of the 10th Corps"*[69]. However the damage was done and the problem was how to recover in some way. In consequence, the order for *Pike* was immediately issued in the hope it would reach Holmes in time to clear or halt the attack without much difficulty and to start the retreat instead.

As if the uncertain action of the headquarters was not enough, an interruption arose in radio communications between Matruh and El Daba from 19:30 to 4:30 the next day.

At twilight on the 27th the Axis troop situation was more or less the following: the 90th Light had reached the coast east of Gerawla; the *Littorio*, really weak, was northwest of Bir Sarahna, at about fifteen kilometres from the 90th; the X Corps was detached to the south of the stronghold, astride the railway line, with the *Brescia* east of the track to Siwa and

[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

the *Pavia* on the right, the 21st *Panzer* with 14 efficient tanks and 600 exhausted men, found itself isolated east of Minqar Qaim; the 15th *Panzer* and the *Ariete* had stopped in the Bir Karima zone; the *Trieste*, on the right of the *Ariete*, guarded the southern flank.

Holmes launched his attack in the evening, but it was a poorly planned and conducted operation. The 50th Division was split into a certain number of columns. Two were not able to get into contact with the Italo-Germans and after a couple of hours went back to the line of departure. One got lost in the dark and ended up on the *Menton* group of the 90th Light and was pushed back with losses. Two, finally, cut in on the *Littorio*. The Italian unit had arrived in the late morning north of Minqar Qaim and after more than one modification to the formation, organised itself in defensive position with the 12th *Bersaglieri*, which provided cover for the tactical headquarters of the Italo-German Army. The British action was chaotic and so blindly conducted and pushed back in the confusion of the night, that it involved Rommel himself. After a ruthless fight, the British retreated rather shocked, leaving 200 prisoners and having lost a number of vehicles. In the reigning confusion of those night hours, it is enough to say that none of the protagonists were able to individuate the enemy with whom they were fighting. Rommel least of all, who affirms in retrospect, *"the combat between my units and the New Zealanders was exceptionally violent"*, confusing the more or less simultaneous clashes between the 2nd New Zealand and the 21st *Panzer* with those of the 50th British and the *Littorio* and his own *Kampstaffel*. Among other things, Rommel continued to be convinced that only New Zealand units had fought at Matruh[70].

With regards to the 5th Indian Brigade, it moved towards the south with trucks and was pushed back by the 580th Reconnaissance Group and other units including the *Pavia*.

Late in the evening the Italo-German intelligence service tried to summarise the enemy situation. The 10th Indian Division resulted in Matruh with its three Brigades and men from the 7th Motor Brigade; east of the track to Bir Khalda, the 69th and the 151st Brigades from the 50th Division; in the Sidi Hamza zone there were parts of the 5th Indian Division and the 4th and 5th New Zealand Brigade; between the track to Siwa and the track to Bir Khalda, about eighty tanks from the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions, two armoured car regiments and the 29th Indian Brigade; in Sidi Haneish,

[70] ROMMEL E., *op. cit.*, p.178. It should be pointed out that the events in the night of 28 June have been reported generally and in a widely approximate manner, also due to Rommel's version. The most attentive to an acceptable reconstruction are AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER (*op. cit.*, pp. 260-263).

about fifty kilometres southeast of Matruh, the 9th and the 10th Brigades of the 5th Indian Division. Overall 560 aircraft were reported on the airfields between Matruh and El Daba. The reconstruction could not be defined as very trustworthy, but its tactical meaning as seen through Rommel's eyes was the following: the Matruh garrison (10th Indian Division reinforced) surrounded by the XX Corps west, X Corps and *Littorio* south and the 90th Light east; and a mixed group of units, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the armoured brigades being surrounded by the DAK and the XX Corps, trying to escape.

Apart from the inexact identification of some British units and the operating possibilities that they still offered to Gott, it has to be admitted that, on the whole, Rommel's intuition was right. For the next day he ordered the destruction of two groups of enemy forces and planned for the 21st *Panzer* and the *Littorio* to pursue the enemy on to Fuka. But the night was long.

Before abandoning the Sidi Hamza zone, General Lumsden wanted to make contact with Freyberg. He went to Minqar Qaim at about 21:15, learned of Freyburg's injury and spoke with General Inglis. He could not accept the request for a coordinated retreat between the two divisions because he had to get fuel supplies at the hold in Bir Khalda and also because he was tied to a certain itinerary. However, he accepted taking the detached New Zealand battalion with him to Bir Khalda and the 5th Brigade's trucks that had flowed there messily in the afternoon. As for his own division, Inglis had already thought up a plan based entirely on the surprise and vehemence of its execution. The 4th Brigade had to open a corridor by force and behind it the bulk would get out. At 22:30 the 4th Brigade moved east. They hit the I/104th German Infantry and the fight was fierce. The German battalion came out semi-destroyed after the hand-to-hand combat and the New Zealand Brigade gained the open space. The remainder of the superior units, on the other hand, (Division Headquarters, the 5th Brigade and reserves) was diverted into another direction at the last moment, in fear of finding that the enemy had already been alerted and thus ready to receive them in quite another way. Consequently the unlikely column with groups of men hanging and grasping to every available wheeled transport, guns included, moved south and arrived... towards *"a German camp of a dozen German tanks so close that they could not pass through them"*[71]. After a brief but spectacular fight between the Germans who were taken by surprise and the New Zealanders that gambled their

[71] KIPPENBERGER H., *op. cit.*, p. 135.

freedom, the latter were able to get by. At 2:30 the 21st *Panzer* pointed out to the DAK that all the attacks had been pushed back, even if the enemy was able to open some corridors for themselves with the support of tanks. *"It is very probable"*, the message admitted, *"that he escaped through these corridors with the bulk of his forces"*[72].

The morning of the 28th Auchinleck expressed the hope of gaining some time in relation to the Fuka position, *"My intention, as before, is to stop the enemy and defeat him at the first opportunity"*. However, he was aware that it all depended on conditions in which Gott and Holmes found themselves. Although lacking precise news, he wrote London:

> "Gott told me yesterday afternoon that due to enemy movement southwards against the eastern flank of the New Zealanders he did not feel secure remaining in the Sidi Hamza-Minqar Qaim zone and he would retreat towards the Fuka line in adherence to my original plan. I have therefore ordered the 10th Corps to comply"[73].

And he added:

> "Due to the great distances and the fluidity of battle, communications are very difficult, but this morning Gott seems to be keeping the situation under control on the front of the 13th Corps and yesterday's operations were a success"[74].

As a matter of fact, the success of the retreat manoeuvre depended a lot on how much it would be possible to organize in Fuka. There was the 5th Indian Division reduced to a couple of tactical groups (*Gleecol* and *Scotcol*) and the remains of the 29th Indian Brigade. However, the 1st Armoured Division had been ordered to move to Fuka, staying on the southern flank of the position. In short, that morning the hope for a break in the fighting seemed justified, thinking that Rommel would not continue the advance leaving behind the entire 10th Army concentrated in Matruh. Instead, two serious unforeseen events completely spoiled the British plan.

The first was the interruption of radio communications, as mentioned. The order concerning the 10th Corps, transmitted by the Army Headquarters at 22:00 on 27 June, was only received by General Holmes

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[72] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

[73] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, p. 620.

[74] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

at 4:30 on the 28th, when *"the 13th Corps had literally disappeared"*, as General Wilson commented some weeks later, *"leaving the 10th in trouble"*[75]. To tell the truth, Holmes was already in full alert from the night before, when 90th Light's rush to the coast had forced the Corps Headquarters to flee. The event was so sudden and unexpected that the Commander and the Chief of Staff had decided to individually try to establish a liaison with the subordinate units, as the signal units had disappeared. However, in the morning of the 28th, Holmes started the preparations to break the isolation.

The hard operational problem he had to solve led him to explain to the Army Headquarters that he was blocked at this point and he had to choose between three alternatives: forcing the blockade made by the 90th Light in the Gerawla zone; rushing south and then turning east; or concentrating the two divisions and resolving the situation by fight. The dispatch crossed with a communication from the army, according to which Maaten Battush (that is Sidi Haneish) seemed to already be in German hands and Matruh on the brink of being attacked from south. Therefore, the 10th Corps had to try to open a way to Fuka, parallel to the coastline. In the early afternoon, however, Auchinleck's answer to Holmes's dilemma came:

> "Don't even mention resolving the situation by fight. There's no time to mount an organized attack along the coast road, probably lacking an objective. You have to get out tonight with all of your troops opened onto a wide front, head east, on the escarpment and reach El Daba. The 13th Corps will cover your movements"[76].

Holmes then, in agreement with the army, scheduled the sally for 21:00. The two divisions would have made an irruption in the southern sector continuing for about thirty kilometres, and then would turn east heading for Fuka. The positions had to be kept all day long without modifications, except for the western perimeter of the entrenched camp, from where the 21st Indian Brigade was taken away and transferred near Gerawla.

The second cause for the lacking defence of Fuka and the consequent new, disastrous British setback was due to Rommel's temperament. He was not a man to grant time for the defeated adversary, especially in those difficult situations. At about 8:00 on the 28th, intelligence collected by the *Panzerarmee* gave indications that the 1st British Armoured Division was

[76] PLAYFAIR I.S.O., *op. cit.*, p. 294.

in the Bir Khalda zone and that men from the 5th Indian were south of Gerawla. The retreat of the 7th Armoured Division and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was confirmed. While the Panzerarmee Hq issued a brief intelligence summary, the 15th *Panzer,* followed by the *Ariete* and the *Trieste*, passed over the track to Bir Khalda and confirmed that there was no trace of the enemy, at least not in the closest area.

Rommel immediately ordered Nehring to cut the retreat of the British motorized units. Accordingly, the *Littorio* had to stop on the coastal road immediately west of Fuka, while the 21st *Panzer* would reach the ridge southwest of the locality. The operational intents issued at 9:00 were summarized in three points: defeating the forces opposing the advance of the DAK and the XX Corps; destroying those closed in Matruh; implementing a secure supply line along the coastal road west of Matruh and therefore behind the X Corps.

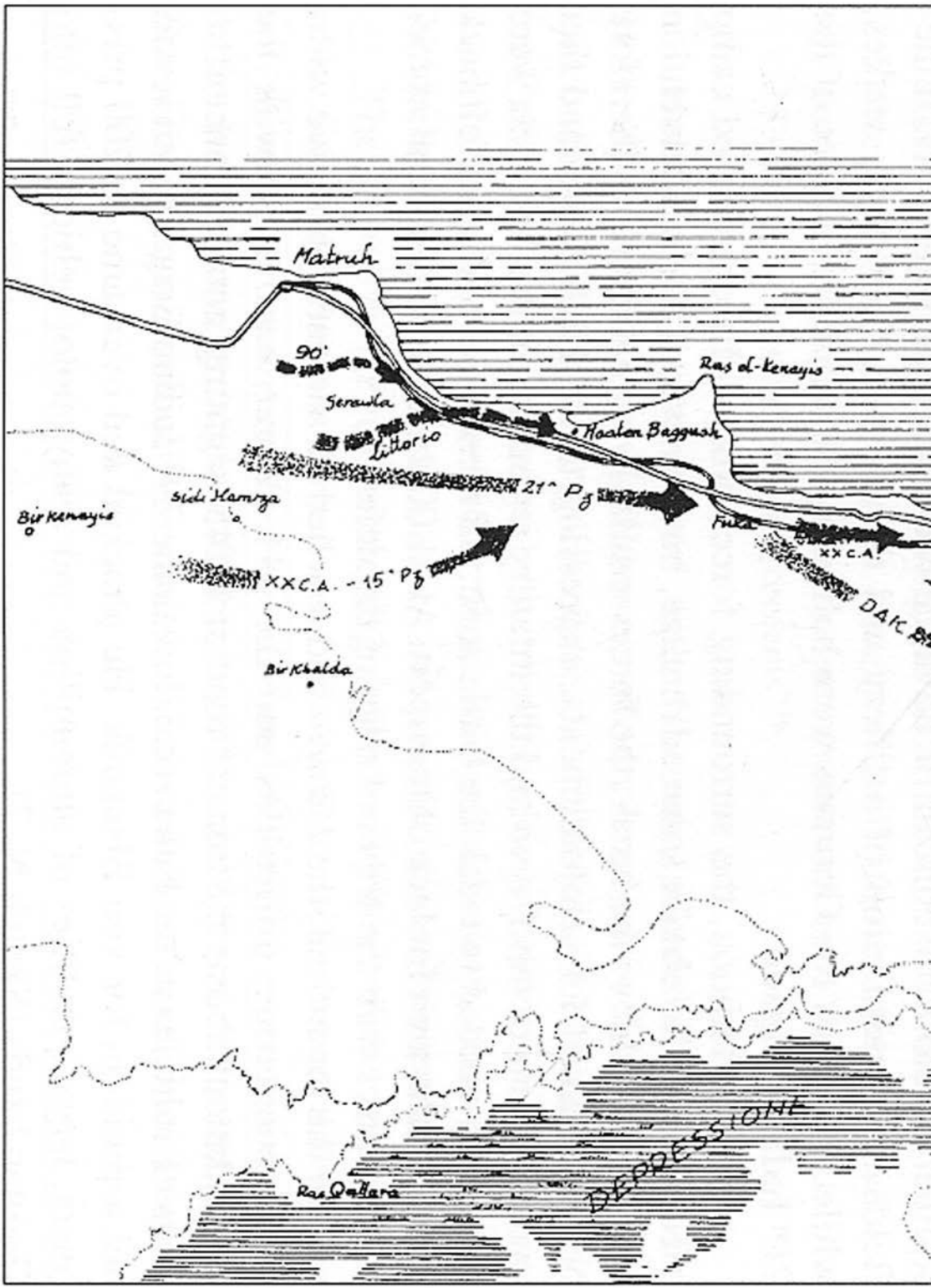
The destruction of the Matruh garrison was entrusted to the infantry divisions. In truth, the action against the entrenched camp had started very early. At 2:00 Navarini had ordered the *Trento* and the 7th *Bersaglieri* to begin the attack at 5:30 astride the road from Charing Cross to Matruh. On their right flank the X Corps would act in support and the 90th Light would attack the opposite side. But in the western and southern sectors the concentric advance was greatly slowed by the minefields, the interdiction of artillery and the *Desert Air Force*'s strikes, while in the east the Germans were halted by the sturdy resistance of the 21st Indian Brigade.

In the afternoon, the surrounding forces around the entrenched camp tried uselessly to obtain some advantage, but not even a *Stuka* intervention was able to achieve the break: the forces available were too small. Therefore Navarini asked for reinforcements, expressing to the High Command that two battalions of the *Trento* and the infantry regiments of the *Sabratha* were absolutely needed to reach the battle zone. All these units had been left back in the Bardia area for lack of transport. At 21:00 the troops stopped at immediate contact with the forward edge of the defence.

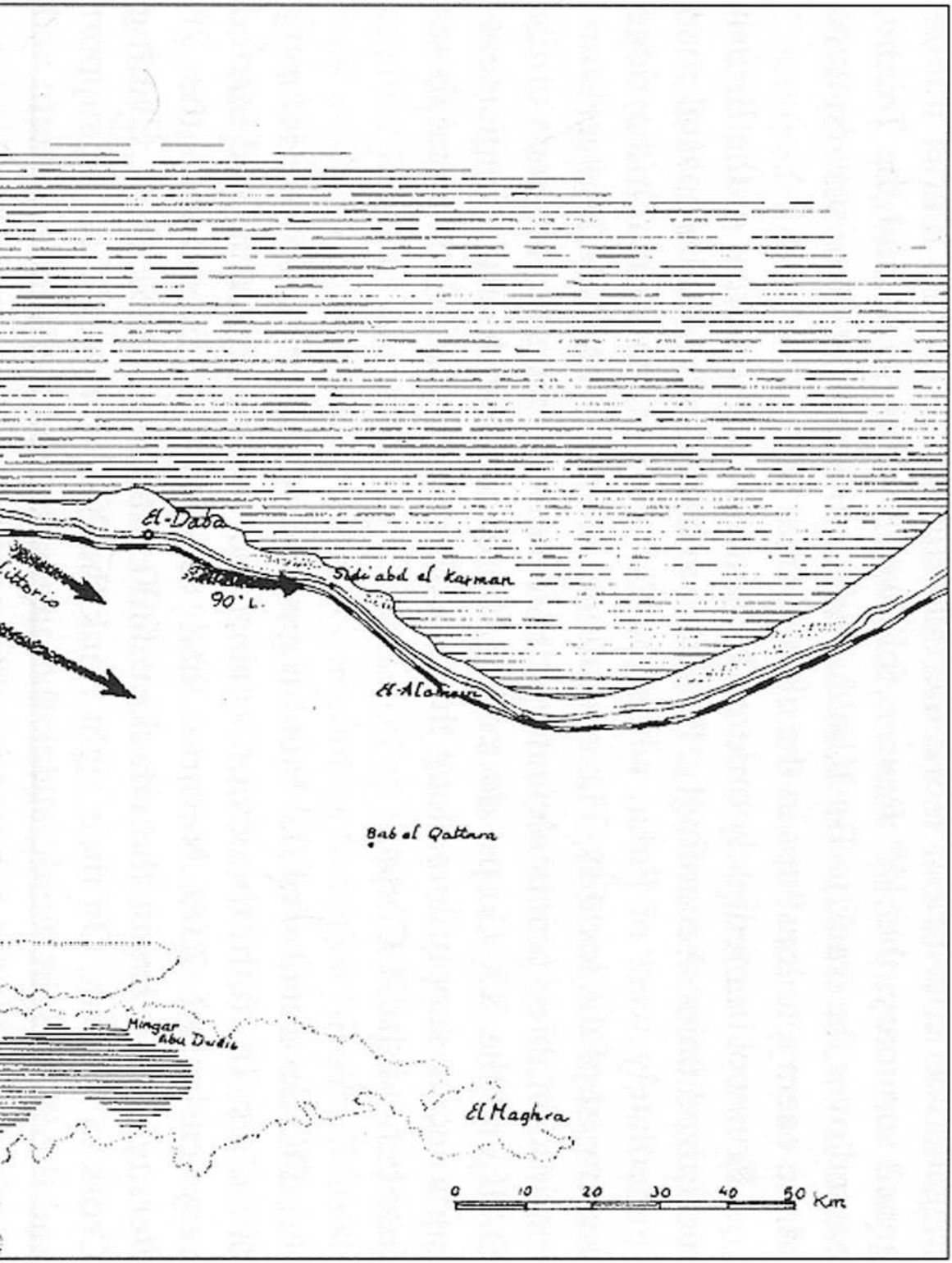
In the meantime, the *Littorio* had reached its assigned objective without encountering difficulties and the 21st *Panzer* was faced with the embankment above the coastal road at 18:45, sighting notable concentrations of vehicles in the Fuka zone. It was the 29th Indian Brigade, but it was not a problem for von Bismarck. He attacked and overcame it: 200 prisoners, large quantities of ammunition and many motor vehicles fell into German hands (Sketch N. 7).

Sketc

"EXPLOITING SUC



h N. 7
CESS (29-30 JUNE)"



At this point, Rommel resigned himself to postponing the concentric assault on Matruh to another day, though not hiding the risk from himself of a break through attempt during the night. In fact the time had arrived for Holmes. The two divisions of the 10th Corps were structured in Brigade level tactical groups, according to a pattern that appeared to offer some new possibilities.

Unforeseen fight was rising up all over the area, whose common characteristic was uncertainty and disorder. Almost all the columns ran into Axis division positions that were getting ready to rest for the night and the surprise, the difficulty of orientation, the excitement, the lack of information plunged both sides into complete confusion.

The sectors in which the British columns looked for escape were the southern (the X Corps, the 580th Reconnaissance Group and the *Kampstaffel Kiehl*) and eastern ones (the 90th Light and the *Littorio*)[77]. Some of them were lucky enough to find space between the network on the large front kept by the 580th Reconnaissance Group and the *Kampfstaffel* and things were much simpler for them.

Some units found resistance, but overcame it and passed through the enemy. Others were pushed back and captured. Overall the 10th Indian Division and the 50th British lost about 2,000 prisoners that day.

Yet the true, serious, snag was not the inability to completely evacuate the Matruh garrison, something that could be factored into the operation, but rather the irruption of the 21st *Panzer* on Fuka, which came to block the main retreat route and captured another 1,600 prisoners, equipment, vehicles and guns. During the night the *Trieste* and the *Ariete* arrived on the route followed by columns of the 10th Corps and intercepted them, taking 530 prisoners and some field artillery.

In the satisfaction of the new victory, a huge disappointment blossomed in Rommel. A number of units were able to escape and among them the 2nd New Zealand Division.

> "It was essential to reach and conquer the El Alamein position", Rommel wrote, "when its preparation was not complete, before the remains of the 8th Army had the time to organise a defence. This posi-

[77] B. PITT describes a part (obviously, the Italian one) of the events like so: *"As a result, to the west the Italians found themselves unexpectedly overrun by the British in retreat, although they did not waste any time taking prisoners but pressed on [to get out] leaving the Italians to go into Matruh as they wished; while to the east some extremely rough fighting developed, etc."* (*The Crucible of War, Year of El Alamein 1942*, London, Cape, 1982, p.127) Now, no British divisions attacked to the west, on the front of the XXI Italian Corps.

tion was the last bastion the British could oppose to our advance. If it crumbled, the walk to the Nile Delta would be open for us"[78].

At 9:38, 29 June, the first fragmentary order was issued, *"The enemy is probably retreating towards the Fuka line. Prepare the army to attack (...) The attack will presumably start the afternoon of the 30th*[79]. Some doubt existed about a possible halt imposed at Fuka by the enemy, since it was known that the 1st Armoured Division was doing its best to receive the disbanded from the 10th Corps and protect their escaping eastwards; but very soon it was confirmed that the 8th Army intended to gather at El Alamein.

The *Littorio* was the first unit to move. It was still lacking the XII Tank Battalion and a large part of the LI, still far behind, so that the bulk of the Division was made up of the 12th *Bersaglieri*[80]. Until 2:30 in the morning it was dealing with ever more consistent attacks by British motorized troops, particularly between 7:30 and 10:30. Yet these attempts, launched from the west towards the coast, had no results. They left 145 prisoners, among which 4 officers, besides the destruction or capture of thirteen vehicles, two guns and other war material by 12th *Bersaglieri*. Around 14:00 Rommel went to General Bitossi. He seemed satisfied with the good performance given by the Division at Matruh and ordered to continue, subject to a pause at the Fuka aviation field to supply water and fuel. The DAK and the XX Corps had to move to the right to bring themselves southeast of Sidi Abd el Rahman, while the 90th Light would go on along the asphalt road beyond El Daba. The engagement of British mechanised units was considered probable. The XXI Corps, having left the II/61st Infantry at Matruh, had El Daba as a point of arrival. The X had to close in on Fuka.

During the delay action the British were trying to accomplish in the early hours of the morning of 30 June, a column of the 1st Armoured Division placed itself between the XX Corps and the DAK and attacked around 5:00 without hesitation. They evidently did not present a great dan-

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[78] ROMMEL E., *Guerra senza odio*, Milan, Garzanti, 1959, p. 180.

[79] Historic diaries of the X and XX Armed Corps.

[80] On that date, the *Littorio* had the Division Headquarters at its disposal together with the 12th *Bersaglieri* Regiment over three battalions, (one of which anti-tank) 133rd Armoured Regiment with part of the LI Tank Battalion M 13/40, I/133rd Artillery with only three 75/27 guns, III Cavalry Battalion *Lanceri di Novara* with a single L6 tank squadron (company), II Arty Bn armed with 100/17 guns from the 21st Artillery *Trieste* as reinforcement. The *XII M14/41 Tank Battalion* and two squadrons from *Novara* were still marching towards Matruh.

ger for the Axis, but rather a brief stop for the Italo-Germans who had to deploy and see what was going on. The attempt constituted a waste of time that Rommel was little inclined to accept. Having prevented the enemy from using the Fuka line made him believe it was possible to overcome the resistance position at El Alamein in a rush and proceed to destroy the remains of the 8th Army before they received reinforcements or could reorganise. After, the rush would have to continue along the coastal road, 20 kilometres up to the crossroads to Cairo, with the aim of leaving Auchinleck uncertain about the direction of attack. The XXI Corps would be employed to block threats coming from Alexandria road, while the few armoured forces would turn southeast to reach the road to Cairo and head for the capital. Of course, Rommel was aware of the exceptional efforts that he asked of the troops, but he was convinced that speed constituted the only weapon capable of overcoming the situation and that it was necessary to exploit it with the utmost daring to the end.

The fact that time was precious was undeniable, but the heedlessness about the real extent of the enemy and, in particular, about the practical possibilities of transferring the so-called armoured and Italian motor divisions (also conceding the doubt that these had not worked as they should have in part) leaves some perplexities. However, the day was not exactly brilliant for the Italian columns.

The *Littorio* soon met up with many troubles. According to Rommel's orders they would have had the 580th Reconnaissance Group on the right and the 21st *Panzer* on the left. Perhaps because of the speed of progression in the desert, perhaps because of the absence of radio links, the *Littorio* went on practically isolated. At about 5:30, southwest of Fuka, a British formation of about 10 tanks reinforced with artillery units facing south opened fire on the Italian vanguard. Convinced of having the sighted German units on the sides, Bitossi ordered the LI Battalion to attack with its 21 efficient tanks. It is in doubt whether the enemy had *Grant* tanks but it is certain that the enemy was equipped with better guns, with armour piercing ammunition and could take advantage of the greater range and killing power compared with the 47/32 guns of the M 13 Italian tanks. The losses were heavy. The commander of the 133rd Armoured Regt was wounded and the commander of the LI Tank Battalion was killed, nine medium tanks destroyed and eleven damaged, the last three light tanks were destroyed, too. Also considering the effects of a couple of successive British night air raids at extremely low altitudes, which caused other victims and destroyed about twenty vehicles, Bitossi's message to the High Command was disconsolate:

"Situation day 30. Loss of a hundred men and twenty tanks. Division engaged for many days, all provisions used up, lacking combat service support, without any supply, urgently requires medical support, supplies, fuel, water".

The fact that an incident of such limited dimensions had provoked such clamorous results was objectively difficult to accept with serenity, but the thing was immediately "picked up" by the ironic comments[81] of the Germans and those that followed them closely afterwards.

Furthermore, the *Ariete* had just eight efficient tanks available, so it also encountered difficulties moving rapidly through the British incursions. Rommel was not looking for subtle and incited De Stefanis at 9:00: *"I'm asking the XX Corps to attack the enemy, destroy him and reach the objective. The enemy has been ordered to retreat (...).*. And at 10:45 he, again, insisted on it: *"I hope that the XX Corps will soon annihilate such a ridiculous enemy"*.

At that time the connections between the Matruh and the Alexandria zones were limited to the coastal road. Further south, there was the El Qattara Track, that moved parallel to this road and which was practicable for vehicles only near El Alamein. It is thus easy to understand the frequency of interruptions in movement both for the enormous traffic jam on the coast caused by the vanguards of advancing columns and the lines of the enemy formations. The *Brescia* also had to stop for enemy fire and faced the threat by deploying the II Bn of the 1st *"Celere"* Artillery. Rommel himself was there in this circumstance by chance and commented to General Lombardi that *"the enemy was surprised by the fact that our units were already so far ahead; that he did not consider the army's objective reached if not in Cairo (...) this longed for objective would be reached within 15 days"*[82]. Then he evidently changed his mind, at least about the general plan, also because a captured document illustrated a remarkable British formation, despite the doubtless strain of some divisions and the fifty kilometres' front. They turned up in line between El Alamein and the El Qattara Depression: the 10th Corps north with the 50th British Infantry Division, the 7th Armoured Division and a South African Brigade in reserve; the 13th Corps south with the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division, the 5th Indian Infantry Division and

[81] It is curious to read that after getting past El Daba (confused with El Douda by the author) the *Littorio "suddenly announced (...) that it had been completely dispersed by the enemy and that they did not have a single tank left because they had blown them all up"* (H.G. VON HESBECK, *Rommel et l'Afrika Korps*, Paris, Payot, 1950, pp. 101-102).

[82] Report by General Lombardi on the operations of the *Brescia* Infantry Division.

a South African Brigade in reserve. It seemed the two armoured divisions covered the front of the respective corps.

As the Axis troops were still moving, supplying was precarious. The renewal of the English air bombing and the sand storms concurred to slow down the advance. Rommel decided to postpone the attack to the early hours of 1 July. The deployment for battle, first scheduled for 17:00 on the 30th, was shifted to the next morning.

It is well known how frequently Rommel affirmed he did not base his movements on adventurous decisions, but on a balanced evaluation of the terms of the operational problem. Generally speaking, accepting these "self-justifications" does not present substantial difficulties. Rommel knew perfectly well that he was accused of gambling, often and willingly, but most historians are inclined to maintain that he had pushed things to the limits of temerity at Matruh.

One does not want to allude to the decision to run to the Delta here, a decision destined to be the object of raging accusations and controversies, but simply to the forcing of the position. His conviction of not finding as much resistance as being a risk to the small and tired Italo-German troops is evident. A truly excessive optimism that he did not even betray in the course of battle and, in particular, in the very difficult situation created in the late afternoon of 27 June, in regards to which von Mellenthin observed, *"This demonstrates that Rommel had an absolute disdain for the enemy and had no idea of his own critical situation"*[83].

The factors playing to his favour in a determining way, and on which he was surely counting, were three: the operational capacity of his troops, the errors and the lack of confidence of the enemy.

As to the first, there is little to say, given that the very high average level of the commanders and German divisions is inarguable. Yet one needs to consider that the losses suffered by the contingent amounted to 300 officers, 570 non-commissioned officers, and 2,490 enlisted, in other words 15% of the total force present. Furthermore, the loss of officers reached 70% in the armoured divisions and in the infantry of the 90th Light. Where the behaviour of the Italian columns is concerned, one must recognise that it could not be superior to what the too poor equipment and weapons, transport and available communications allowed for. The recurring delays in the movement of the units could amaze, but there is nothing surprising when remembering - and it does not seem to happen very often

[83] F. VON MELLENTHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

- some characteristics: the Italian troops *were not* motorised; the lion's share of supplies and servicing of the divisions drawing from the war spoils in Tobruk, Bardia, Sollum and Matruh had always been taken by the Germans; the hundreds of British transports captured had represented a manna, it is true, but the lack of spare parts and not knowing the vehicles brought to a situation of *status quo ante*, especially keeping in mind the length of the routes. Given the kinds of armoured wheeled craft, the German columns had a cruising speed of about 20 kilometres per hour, whereas the Italians reached 7-8.

Concerning the errors of the British leaders, the first, as seen by Dorman-Smith, was made by Auchinleck himself. The Matruh entrenched camp had a defect: it was situated on a promontory which was only accessible from the coastal road. According to Dorman-Smith:

> "It would have been a wise move to have the bulk of the 10th Corps abandon the Marsa Matruh promontory immediately, 26 June, leaving only some cover divisions on the minefields between the coast west of Marsa Matruh and Minqar Omar. But Matruh was a position that had a certain international fame, even if its strategic value was poor; the news of its rash abandonment would have provoked consternation and Auchinleck was by principle opposed to retreats"[84].

It is not clear what meaning one can attribute to the statement that Auchinleck opposed retreats. However, as we know, he was practically obliged to wait for Rommel on the Matruh line and the remark seems well-grounded.

The second accusation is made by von Mellenthin. Auchinleck had issued precise orders regarding the intention of putting up *"the most energetic resistance possible"* against the enemy and about the army corps' behaviour in battle. *"If an army corps or part of it loses ground, the other is to be immediately able to extract a rapid advantage from the situation attacking the enemy on the flank"*, yet he had also clarified without mincing his words that he did not intend to gamble the 8th Army at Matruh, which is the same as saying that he had decided to retreat as soon as the danger of being surrounded presented itself.

> "A battle", von Mellenthin commented, "cannot be fought in this way. If Auchinleck didn't feel strong enough to fight at Matruh, he should

[84] AA.VV., *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Milan, Rizzoli e Purnell, 1967, III vol., p. 171.

> have retreated to Alamein. If he wanted to fight at Matruh, and his forces were sufficient for a victorious defence of the place, then he should not have subordinated the idea that it was only a delaying fight. As a result of Auchinleck's hesitation, the British not only lost the opportunity to destroy the *Panzerarmee* but suffered a serious upset that could have easily turned into an irreparable disaster. I want to highlight this point because for those who want to learn from examples of conducting combat, few battles are as instructive as that of Matruh"[85].

One cannot help agreeing in full. You could observe that an energetic and aware action on Gott's part could equally have determined the British success, but even in this regard the poor influence Auchinleck had over his two corps commanders, principally over Gott, is undeniable. Was it his fault? In part no, surely. He could not avoid being heavily influenced by the existing confusion and the vague and incomplete information about the enemy and even about the situation of the army. These are the troubles emerging when you replace a commander in the imminence of a battle. Furthermore, it is amazing that he did not seek immediate personal contact with Gott, the man who had the armoured and motorized troops at his disposal.

With regards to this, one can limit oneself to quoting von Mellenthin once again:

> "Marshal Foch once stated that *"a lost battle is a battle that you believe is lost"* and this applies exactly to the situation in the Marsa Matruh zone on 27 June"[86].

That day, and mainly that afternoon, the Goddess of Fortune extended both hands to Rommel overturning Gott's equilibrium and energy and infusing such pessimism in him as to provoke the undoing of the 13th Corps. The consequences of such insufficient action of command would have huge repercussions on the whole 8th Army. The opportunity for attaining victory was lost, the halt hoped for at Fuka was skipped and the retreat turned into a disordered and convulsive movement eastwards. In a word, they opened *the Flap*, the crisis.

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[85] F. VON MELLENTHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

[86] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Chapter two

THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

1.The Initial Italo-German Attempt at Breaking Through (1-4 July)

Even if Rommel's unexpected and very rapid advance had sunk the 8th Army into a serious crisis and public opinion at Cairo into alarmed worry, you could not really call it panic or demoralization. The measures taken were, however, drastic. The Commander in Chief in Cairo prepared to transfer to Gaza in southern Palestine and started burning office correspondence[1], then went on to study which demolitions to carry out. He had also started work on preparing defensive barrages of the operational axis leading to the capital and arranged for the evacuation of the entire logistical organization east of the Delta. As for the *Mediterranean Fleet*, the ships that were indispensable to the struggle in the Mediterranean were divided between Haifa, Port Said, and Beirut and the rest were transferred south of the Canal, while the Naval Commander in Chief moved to Ismailia. Lastly, the Royal Air Force was forced to take medium and heavy bombers back to Palestine.

Among the civilians, repercussions of events were greater. The Stock Exchange had a black moment. University students showed marked agitation. Hundreds and hundreds of people hurried to leave for Sudan, Palestine and South Africa. The two cities of Alexandria and Cairo appeared very uneasy. But this all lasted for just a few days.

On 28 June at 20:00, Auchinleck provided the Chief of Staff with a very realistic assessment of the situation, even if based on an estimate of the Italo-German forces that was superior to reality:

> 1. The enemy in the western desert enjoys an availability of tanks superior to that of the 8th Army. On account of the absence of natural obstacles to mechanized movement and the ease with which a force better equipped with tanks is able to outflank the desert side of any position, except for the El Alamein-Qattara Depression line, the armoured vehicles remain the main factor for the preservation of the initiative.
> 2. Enemy. They have obtained all recent successes with their three German divisions. The Italians have played a minor role. Their tactics

[1] As the destruction of documents took place on Wednesday, 1 July, the day acquired the ironic name "Ash Wednesday" among the British troops.

and adherence to fundamental principles have been excellent, rapidity of movement and ability to succeed in supplying the forward troops has been even more remarkable. Their leaders are well-trained and know how to react to the situations that usually come up in battle (...).
Up until now, as far as we know, it is unlikely that the enemy will receive much more in terms of vehicles and men, but the hope of conquering Egypt could lead them to divert some forces from Russia.

On the contrary, their maritime communications with Libya are becoming precarious at this moment and they are always about to run out of one material or another. The occupation of Egypt would greatly facilitate the resolution of their supply problems. Their capacity to supply forward troops, in the event that they are trying to advance towards the Delta, cannot be estimated with precision, yet they have already done great things and have captured many of our vehicles, so that we need to be prepared for this eventuality.
3. Objective. Our objective must be that of preventing the adversary from blocking our supplies to the Red Sea at all costs before we have re-established an adequate armoured force to gain the initiative again and start a counteroffensive. Equally, it is essential to keep them from increasing their armoured units in Libya and that involves a maximum effort against their maritime communications.
4. Maritime communications. The preservation of Malta and Alexandria and the most western airports in Egypt is extremely important if we seriously want to interrupt the enemy's supply lines with Libya.
5. Air strength. We cannot resume the land offensive until we have brought the armoured forces to the necessary level. In the meantime, our only possibility for offence relies on the air combat force, for which it is fundamental to maintain the highest level of efficiency being the only one allowing us some initiative.
6. Intentions. It is my intention, in full agreement with the Commander in Chief of the Air Force, to preserve the 8th Army in the state of a mobile field complex and to resist any further enemy attempt to proceed east at all costs.
7. Procedure.
a. impose the greatest possible slow down on the adversary, without allowing for the surrounding or destruction of the army, on the Fuka line and then on the positions in El Alamein;
b. in the case that retreat from El Alamein becomes obligatory, the 8th Army (less the 1st South African Division) would withdraw along the

"Barrels Track", from Deir el Qattara to Cairo, and would continue to face the enemy as long as he tried to head for Cairo. The 1st South African, currently detached in the El Alamein defence area, would retreat to Alexandria.

c. the 1st South African Division and the 9th Australian Division, as well as the forces and columns on their way to being established in the Delta, will form the *Delta Force* under General Stone, which will be responsible for the defence of the western margin of the Delta, step by step resistance if they penetrate into the Delta and the defence of Alexandria;

d. if the enemy moves along the coast in the direction of Alexandria, the 8th Army will attack the southern flank and rear. If they move on Cairo, the *Delta Force* will attack their northern flank and rear;

e. in the meantime an attack force will be set up ready to launch a counteroffensive along "Barrels Track" or the coastal road or along both, according to the situation;

f. if ousted from the El Alamein positions, I will assume direct control of both the 8th Army and the Delta Force, with a tactical headquarters of circumstance outside of Cairo. Lieutenant General Corbett will lead the 8th Army"[2].

Back in England General Brooke found himself faced with absolutely unexpected prospects. In Russia, the German armed groups had broken the Soviet front with the great summer offensive of 23 June. In Africa, Rommel's army was rushing towards Cairo. Naturally, this latter circumstance was more worrying. "*The situation in the Middle East*", he observed, "*couldn't be more desperate and I really don't know how it will turn out*"[3]. At the 29 June meeting he had to do with Ernest Bevin, the Minister for Public Works, who asked him, "*rude and impertinent questions about the situation in the Middle East, interrogating me continuously about subjects that I had just explained*", which led him to comment that it made him, "*beside himself that he had to listen to men that didn't have the slightest idea of how to face the situation and who threw out fantastic theories, as if they were the great historic masters in the art of war*"[4].

However, the person who was most under pressure was Churchill. On 25 June, while he was still in the United States, an important conservative Member of Parliament, Sir John Wardlaw-Milne, had presented a

[2] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, p. 621-623.

[3] BRYANT A., *Tempo di guerra*, Vol. II, Milan, Longanesi, 1960.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 394.

burning motion to the House of Commons, "*This House, while paying homage to the heroism and the tenacity of the imperial armed forces engaged in exceptionally difficult situations, states having no faith in the direction of the war*". Then Churchill got ready for the debate scheduled for 1 July.

It is worth addressing how the defeat at Ain el Gazala, the unexplainable fall of Tobruk, the messy flow of what was left of the 8th Army into Egypt, the serious loss of men and materials and the incumbent danger on the Canal was not put upon those who fought in the desert, as is usually done with politicians, but upon the political leadership of the war. The principle of the real and concrete responsibility of the political body put before the strategic situation of the armed forces was considered more important than the eventual and possible mistakes of the military leaders in the field. Not only that, but when the resonance of the announced public debate made clear the possibility of a profound political crisis with inevitable repercussions of military nature, Wardlaw-Milne offered to retract the motion, as the gravity of the situation in Egypt had rendered a large public discussion inopportune. Churchill, who attributed the gesture not to the intention of avoiding a worsening in the course of military operations in the Middle East, but rather to his opponents' fear of coming out defeated from the challenge launched out against the coalition government, refused it considering a clarification to be indispensable due to the clamour the initiative had caused all over the world. Among other things, he decided to announce Auchinleck's direct assumption of command of the 8th Army[5].

Besides, the criticisms formed by public opinion were serious and well-founded and were well-synthesized by Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord of the Private Seal, in a confidential report drawn up for the Prime Minister:

[5] It is of keen interest to read Churchill's pages on the motion for a vote of no confidence. Among other things, during the discussion, a Member of Parliament came out with a suggestive proposal: *"We have five or six generals in this country, who are citizens of other countries, Czechs, Poles, and French, all trained in the engagement of these German weapons and these German techniques. I know very well that this knocks our pride, but wouldn't it be possible to temporarily entrust the combating units to one of these men of command for some months, at least until the time we are able to have mini experts too? (...) They know how to fight this war; our men don't, and I say that it is much better to win the battles and save the lives of our British soldiers under the command of other members of the United Nations rather than lose them under the command of our incapable officers (...)"*. Then in support of the assertion that the British Army was dominated by prejudices of class, he cited the sarcastic comment circulating in England: if Rommel had been in the British Army, he would have remained a Sergeant! (W. CHURCHILL, *op. cit.*, P. IV, Vol. I, pp. 449-467).

"(...) 1. Journalistic correspondence prone to excessive optimism. It is true that these correspondences are not official in any respect, but they are inevitably influenced by the information provided to the press by military authorities whose general tenor was such as to lead correspondents to giving a picture of the situation that was too optimistic, without there being any official communication that tried to counterbalance the effects. The impression was derived that the authorities were not completely aware of the gravity of the situation and that the military intelligence services were not accurate enough and had erroneously led our commanders engaged in the battle. The general character of these correspondences has undoubtedly contributed to making the shock of losing Tobruk and the retreat to Marsa Matruh much worse.

2. Performance of the Generals. It is a widely held opinion that with better military commanders Rommel would have been defeated, above all in the critical moment in which, according to General Auchinleck, he was forced to deplete his reserves. It is generally held that there was a shortage of commanders and that the entire campaign was excessively inspired by the concept of a defensive action, without the necessary energy to counterattack in the decisive moment.

This series of criticisms has given birth to the doubt that neither the Commander in Chief nor the commander of the 8th Army have any precise idea about the tactics and the strategy of modern war with mechanised vehicles and that it is now necessary to proceed with radical changes in command, entrusting the responsibility to men who are more expert and have a better disposition for mechanised war.

3. Commander in Chief. The criticisms expressed in point 2. give birth to an even more serious doubt that the Commander in Chief is also outdated and incapable of evaluating the best way of fighting Rommel and his troops. Connected to this doubt is the impression that the cooperation between the air and land forces was not as efficient as it could have been and that there is still a lack of collaboration and of strategic preparation in the central organization.

4. Weapons. Possibly the bitterest criticism is that which stands on the fact that after almost three years of war we are still inferior with regards to key weapons such as tanks and anti-tank guns and that our present defeat is in great part due to this inferiority.

5. Research and inventions. There is also the widespread opinion that, although our country has extremely able researchers at its disposal, it has not been able, for one reason or another, to take adequate advantage of these capabilities in the race to produce more efficient arms and that it is

necessary to move forward to some innovation in the organizational realm to extract the full benefits of this important aspect of the war effort.
6. Aviation. People are unable to understand how it can be said, according to the statements made by General Auchinleck, that we have been able to preserve moral superiority in the air, when at the same time we are incapable of stopping the enemy advance. This gives birth to doubts about the availability of efficient aircraft and has raised anew the whole question of dive bombers and other problems, among which the types of aircraft. On this point rests the worry that the planners' ideas are too rigid and that this rigidity keeps us, even if we enjoy air superiority, from achieving the same results as the enemy in air attacks.
The question has also been raised about the interception of reinforcements that are flowing to the enemy from Libya, and it has been asked if we can make more use of craft with greater autonomy considering our naval weakness in the Mediterranean.
The above summarizes, in my opinion, the reasons for great unrest among the more thoughtful spirits in our country"[6].

Who knows what Mussolini would have done if, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar report had arrived on his table of Prime Minister, Minister of War, Minister of the Navy, Minister of the Air Force and Commander in Chief of the troops operating on all fronts, all posts that he had demanded and held for years.

El Alamein (in Arabic: the two flags) is a small railway station, in correspondence with the Gulf of Arabia, between Matruh and Alexandria. It is about 100 kilometres from the latter and about 230 kilometres from Cairo, an exultant Rommel wrote to his wife in the evening of 30 June. Further south, about 60 kilometres, the Qattara Depression stands out: an immense area that becomes progressively impracticable, covered with quicksands and salty marshes, reaching 180 metres below sea level in the central part, It is shaped like a hunting horn with the mouthpiece northeast, more or less at the height of El Alamein, and the bell (more than 140 kilometres wide) southwest, just east of the Siwa oasis.

Between the depression and the coast, in the band of terrain closed by the Sidi Abd el Rahman and El Imayid meridians (west and east of El Alamein, respectively), there is the battlefield where the dreams of the Axis were shattered and the fears of Great Britain vanished.

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[6] CHURCHILL W., *op. cit.*, P. IV, vol. 1, pp. 453-455.

From the combination of escarpments, of about 200-250 metres altitude, delineating the north of the depression like a crest line, the terrain descends gradually to the sea without substantial changes and does not present significant obstacles to movement. Natural elements worth noting are the *deir*, shallow depressions of various dimensions; the *tell*, summits of little hills and some rocky ridges running mostly parallel, partly covered with free sand, up to a few kilometres from the coast. Only the latter had tactical significance because they could offer a position for static defence: El Miteiriya, El Ruweisat and Alam el Halfa. The last two gave their names to the first two battles of El Alamein.

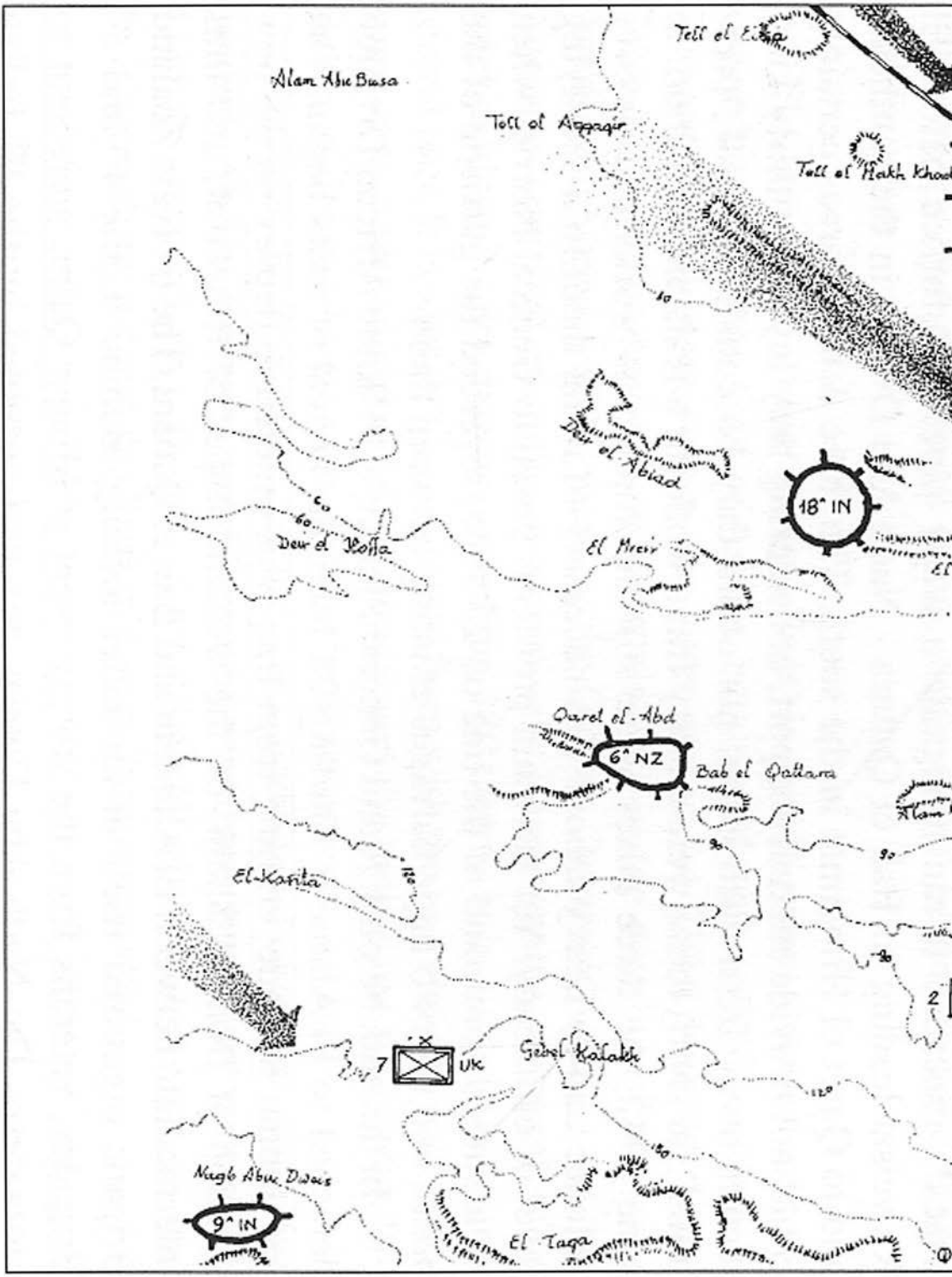
The defensive value of the El Alamein gap was recognised in the spring of 1941 by General Marshal-Cornwall, at that time commander of the British troops in Egypt, who prepared three "defence areas" or *boxes*: one around the station of El Alamein, one at Bab el Qattara (or Qaret el Abd), about halfway between the railroad and the depression, and the third at Naqb Abu Dweiss, a corridor for wheeled vehicles on the edge of the depression (Sketch N. 8).

El Alamein was important for the station and the origin of two tracks running towards Qattara: the "Red Track" (because indicated in red on the British military maps from the time) to Naqb Abu Dweiss, and the "Water Track", (because it ran alongside a water pipe) that forked before El Ruweisat leading to Bab el Qattara - Naqb Abu Dweiss in the southeast and to Qaret el Himeimat in the south. The three defence areas certainly could not provide mutual support, considering they lay about thirty kilometres away from each other, nor could they be considered real "positions". In short, these were a hasty framework for a resistance position. In June 1942, the three *boxes* were still incomplete as works and passive defence and so heavy labour was necessary to bring them to a satisfying level of efficiency. Yet the main problems posed to General Norrie, when he assumed command of the line on 23 June, regarded the garrison of the *boxes* and the two huge barrages existing between them.

In the end, he only found General Pienaar's 1st South African Division detached to El Alamein. Starting 28 June, the arrival of units began. The 18th Indian Brigade, coming from Iraq, was ordered to deploy on the new position of Deir El Shein, on the western slopes of Ruweisat, and thus intermediate between El Alamein and Bab el Qattara. The 6th New Zealand Brigade organised itself in the latter locality. Behind it, the 4th and 5th Brigades, veterans from the stormy event at Minqar Qaim, were sent to reorganise. The Naqb Abu Dweiss *box* was occupied by the 9th Indian

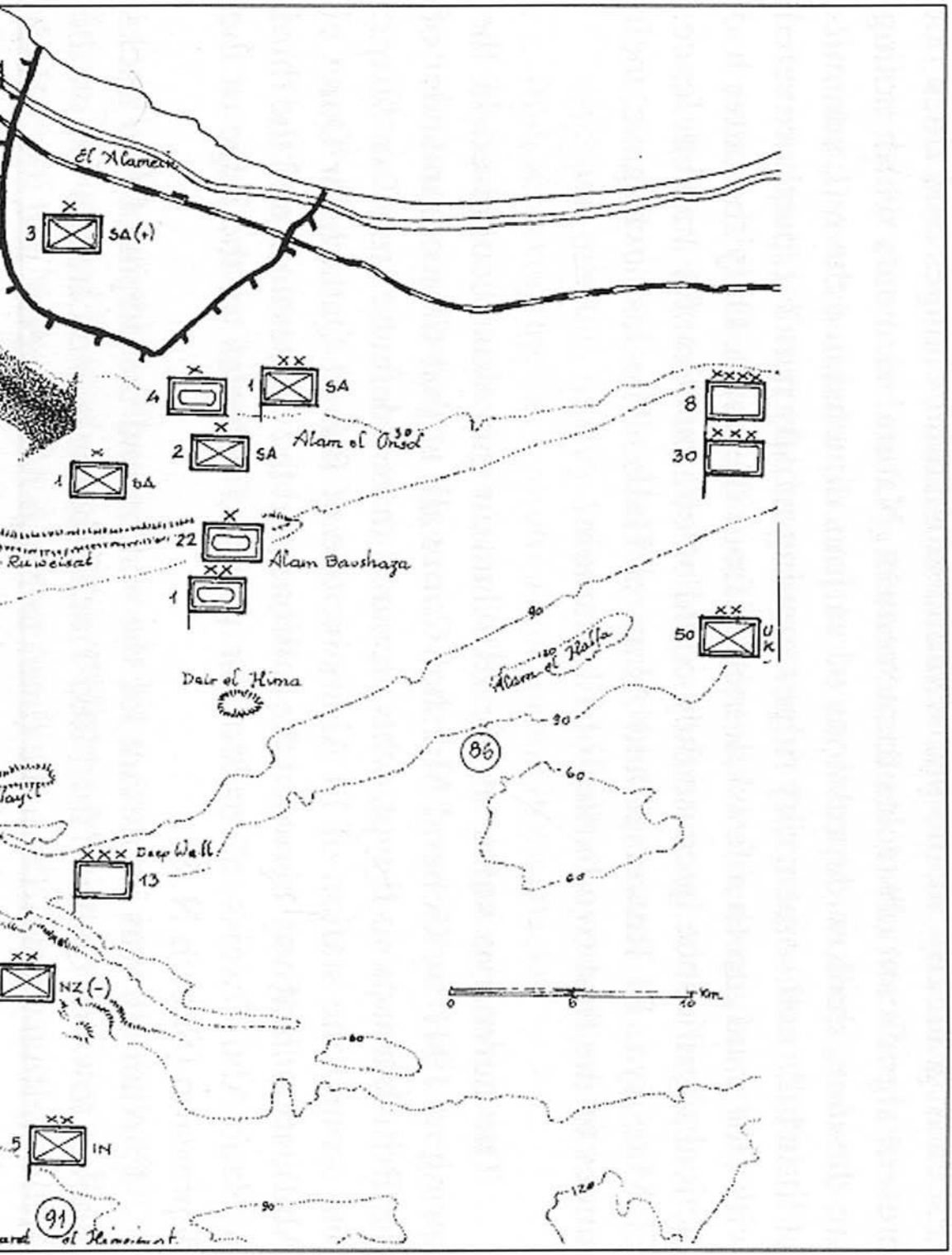
Sketch

"THE BRITISH FORMATION A



N. 8

AT EL ALAMEIN ON 1 JULY"



Brigade. This was the situation when Auchinleck decided to activate the line after the disaster at Matruh.

The Commander in Chief visited the defence position on 29 June. He had the conviction that the enemy was short of breath, but also knew, from interceptions, that Rommel had ordered an attack on the "new positions" as soon as possible[7]. However, he persevered in his determination not to have a fight to the death. *"Under no circumstance"*, he communicated to London, *"do I intend to allow that the 8th Army be surrounded or immobilised"*. Some orders derived from this conviction that, as much as they were consequential, left cause for uncertainties and misinterpretations.

First of all, the 10th Corps Headquarters, now superfluous because of the presence of the 13th and the 30th, was sent to the rear to organise the defence of the Delta. Secondly, Norrie and Gott received orders to conduct the retreat, were abandoning El Alamein rendered necessary. The South Africans would retreat to Alexandria and the rest of the army to *uadi* Natrun, about sixty kilometres northeast of Cairo. Thirdly, the arranging of the divisions would be adapted to the criteria of combat groups generally based on an infantry battalion, a couple of field artillery batteries, an anti-tank battery and an anti-aircraft battery, a machinegun company, engineer and services and support units. Everything that was not needed by the garrison of the *boxes* or the constitution of the above-mentioned combat groups had to be sent behind.

So, the 3rd South African Brigade with the 1st South African Field Artillery and the 7th British Heavy Field Artillery kept the El Alamein *box*; while the combat group of the 1st Brigade and that of the 2nd were on the northern slopes of Ruweisat. The remainder of the division was sent to Alexandria to form the *Scrubbforce*, with the task of defending the port, together with the 9th Australian Division.

The 2nd New Zealand Division sent 10 companies to the Delta, and the 18th Indian Brigade two battalions. The rest of the 50th British Division was detached east of Alam el Halfa, structured in three columns. With regard to the 1st Armoured Division, the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades had to reorganise respectively northwest and southeast of Ruweisat; the 7th Motor Brigade stopped between Bab el Qattara and Naqb Abu Dweiss.

As it is easy to imagine, this "earthquake" in the troops' tactical disposition could not avoid criticisms and perplexities. General Gott, who did not hide serious apprehensions, was convinced that the evacuation of Egypt was inevitable and even that the New Zealanders would go home.

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[7] HINSLEY F.H., *op. cit.*, p. 391.

Among other things, in a short meeting with General Kippenberger, he showed strong doubts about Pienaar's fighting spirit. To come to the point, he *"feared the worst"*[8]. General Norrie, on the other hand, saw things differently. In his opinion El Alamein was the last beach and there existed the possibility of stopping the *Panzerdivisionen*, reduced to their own shadow. So, Auchinleck's intention to fight there seemed clear to him. As you can see, none of Auchinleck's main subordinate commanders had understood the operational design of the Commander in Chief.

The troops' morale was, all in all, discreet. No doubt that the recent events had left more than one mark, but, at least according to qualified protagonists, it was not a question of lack of confidence in the leaders. Instead, the tendency of reciprocal accusations between the various armies was consolidating, as it had appeared before and been rendered more marked during the battle of Ain el Gazala. It is well known that, on the whole, the British Army was multinational in nature, and this is in part an inevitable feature. However, one aspect seemed to purposefully cause friction. The commanders, the headquarters and the armoured divisions were all British and this incited rivalry and doubts, even more so since the evident lack of cooperation between infantry, artillery and tanks had provoked serious misunderstandings and exchanges of accusations[9]. Furthermore, the diffidence of all the divisions from the Dominions, in regards to the Commander in Chief and vice versa, was fed by the limitations imposed on the employment of these units by their respective governments. The repercussions of such a situation naturally reached London and created a new problem.

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[8] KIPPENBERGER H., *op. cit.*, p. 139. Where Pienaar was concerned, whatever the level of the action of his command may have been, it seems that his sentiments in regards to the British could not be defined as idyllic. During the night of 1 July two English journalists reached the Headquarters of the 1st South African and found Pienaar on the telephone. *"The General, evidently, is speaking with an aviation Headquarters for bombing raids and his irritation is growing with the tone of his voice. Still this afternoon - he screams - your damned bombers, tormented my II Battalion of the* Royal Durban Light Infantry *for hours on end, which suffered unnecessary losses, although they had made every possible signal. Truly shameful. You should know now, dear Sir, that my father fought furiously for forty-two years in Transvaal against you damned English people, and that the feelings of my family have not changed at all since then. I can therefore understand perfectly that, in the same spirit, the plan of the Royal Air Force includes the annihilation of South African forces!".*

"Only - he concluded extremely agitated, while the veins in his neck swelled frighteningly like a wrestler struggling with an apoplexy - I wish to have precise ideas here immediately. I want to know which side I am on, I want to know if Rommel is my friend or my enemy, if I need to shoot at him or if I need to put my anti-air into action when your planes appear, something I would do with indescribable enthusiasm. Please Sir, respond in written form. Good night!" (P. CACCIA DOMINIONI, *Alamein 1933-1962*, Milan, Longanesi, 1954, p. 53).

[9] CARVER M., *La battaglia di El Alamein*, Milan, Baldini e Castoldi, 1964, p. 34.

To complete the picture of the 8th Army at the end of June it is also necessary to mention its articulation. All the forces entrusted with static or flexible defence were organised into Norrie's 30th Corps: the 1st South African Division, the 6th New Zealand Brigade, the 9th and the 10th Indian Brigades. The units on hand for dynamic response depended on Gott's 13th Corps: the 2nd New Zealand Division, (less the 6th Brigade) the 1st Armoured Division, and the 7th Motor Brigade[10].

The news about Axis forces seemed to indicate Rommel's intention was to push the bulk of the *Panzerarmee* towards Naqb Abu Dweiss to sink to the extreme south and then head northeast to wrap around the entire 8th Army. The night of 30 June, however, another *Enigma* message was deciphered. Rommel would attack at 15:00 on the 30th with massive air support, developing a demonstrative action against the El Alamein *box* before noon. Uncertainty as to the point chosen for the main effort remained. However, it was more than enough and Auchinleck immediately had a short note issued to all levels of the hierarchy:

> "The enemy is stretched to the limit and thinks that we are a defeated army. Their tactics against the New Zealanders were absolutely ineffective. They hope to take Egypt with a bluff. Let's show them they are wrong"[11].

Then he ordered the completion of the defensive measures, given the possibility of an Italo-German offensive *"at any moment after midday"*[12].

Among these measures there was also the urgent recovery of Lumsden's 1st Armoured Division, whose columns were moving back without missing an opportunity to deal a blow to the Axis divisions that they had intermingled with, just to slow down their progression. So, as we know, on the 30th the 7th Motor Brigade, reinforced with vehicles and artillery, attacked the XX Corps, causing them to lose the whole morning.

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[10] The 1st Armoured Division was left with the 4th and the 22nd Armoured Brigade. The 7th Motor Brigade depended directed on the 13th Corps Headquarters from 1 to 5 July, then passed to the 7th Armoured Division.

[11] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, p. 628. It should be noted that, according to the British Intelligence Service, Rommel had 100-150 German tanks available and maybe 40-50 Italian ones on 27 June; 120 German tanks and 100 Italian ones on 30 June. For the record, the information about the number of Italian tanks was uncertain but, given the quality of the armour, it was of little importance in the eyes of the British.

[12] HINSLEY F.H., *op. cit.*, p. 393.

Sket

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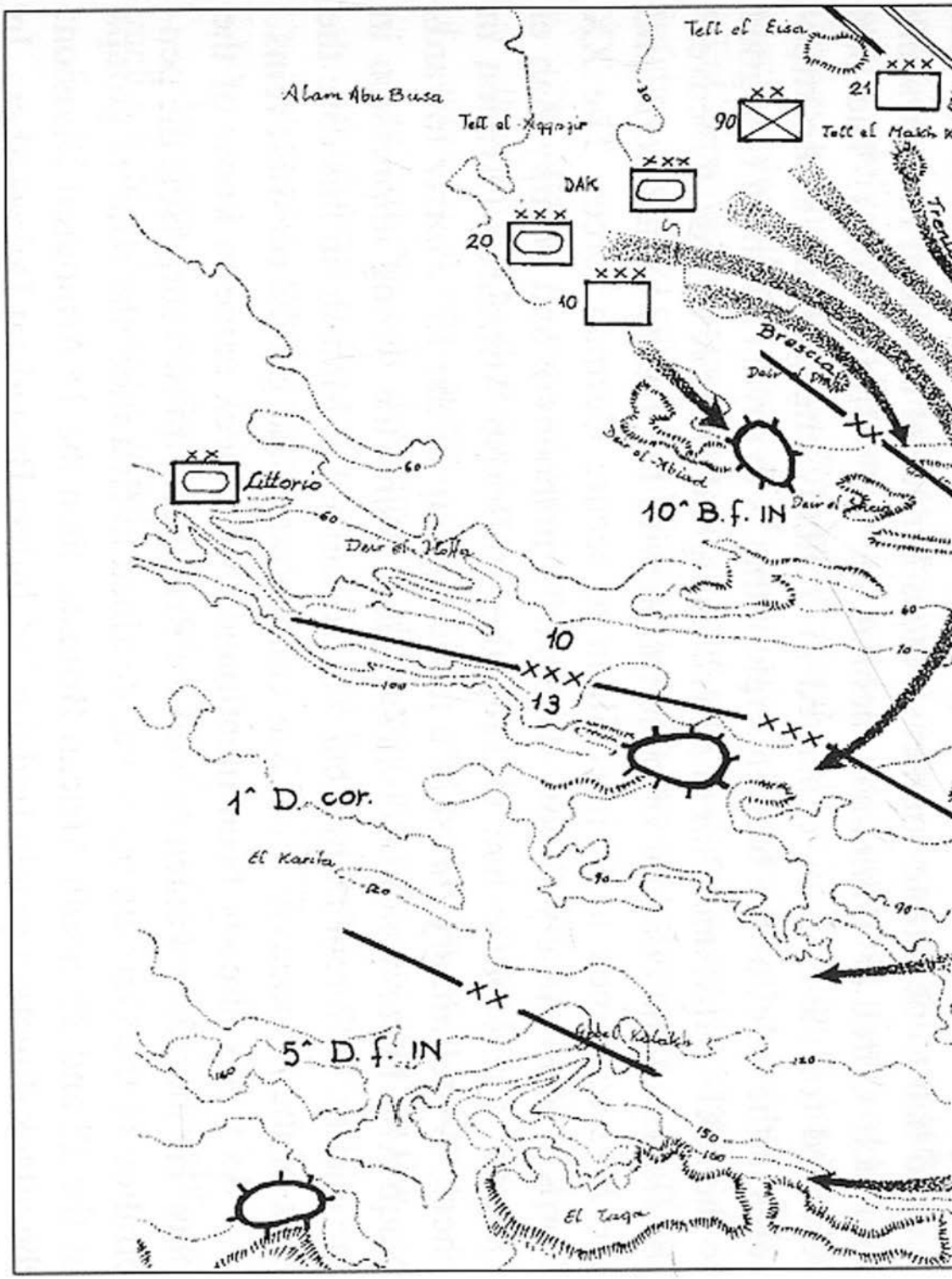
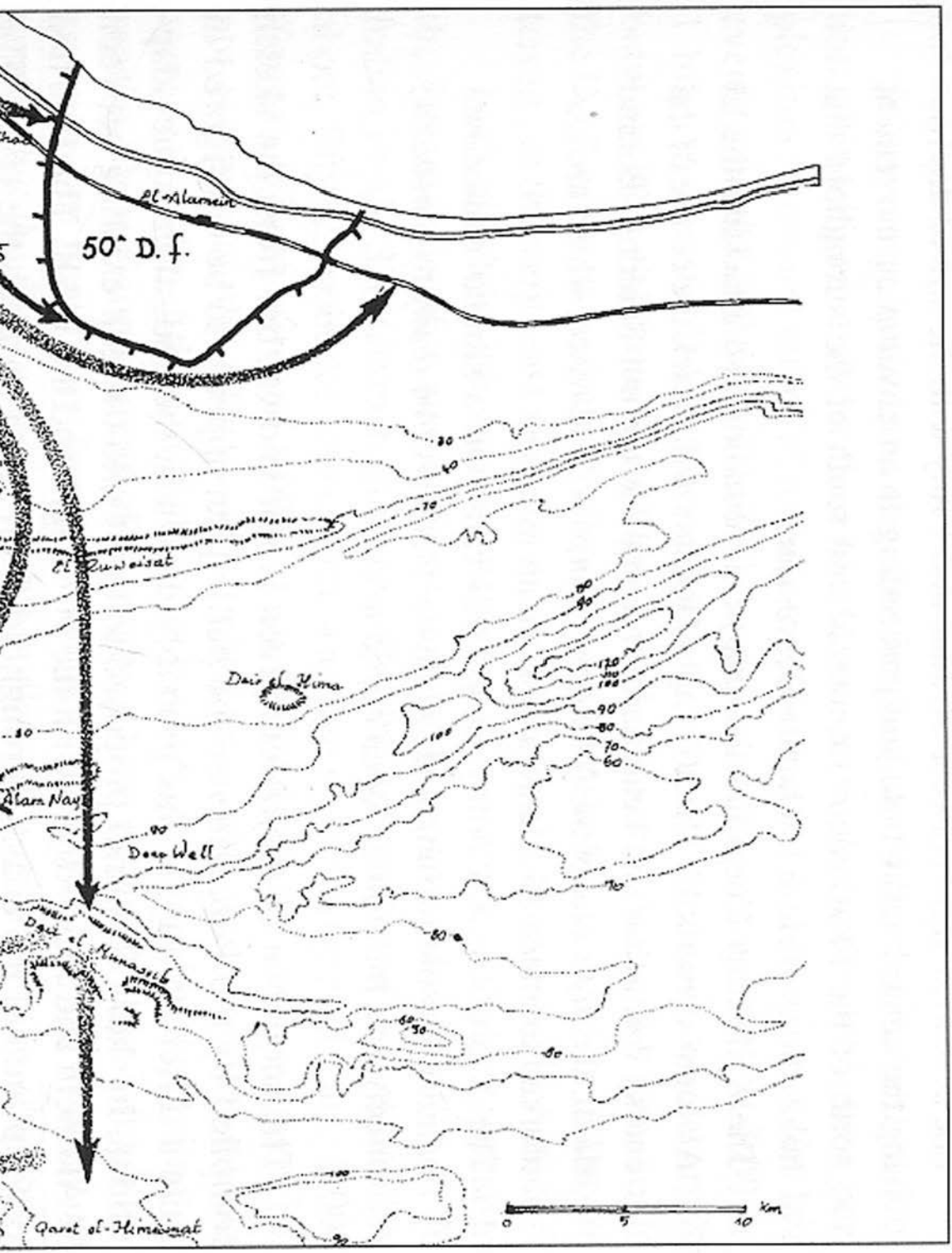
AND THE ASSUMED BRIT



ch N. 9
ANOEUVRE PLAN
TISH POSITIONS ON 1 JULY"



In the meantime, a mechanized column opened fire suddenly on the *Littorio* causing them serious damage in a brief clash, and in the afternoon it was the DAK's turn. But such an intense activity, together with the discomfort of marching on vile terrain and amidst frequent sand storms, had caused heavy wear and tear on the British divisions. The 1st Armoured Division was therefore hardly able to regain the 8th Army positions. The Division Headquarters lost its direction and passed the night of the 1st at El Mreir. The 22nd Armoured Brigade, with 28 tanks remaining, 10 of which towed, rallied together in the dark south of El Alamein, escaping the fire of the 3rd South African Brigade by chance. The 4th Armoured Brigade, which still had about 40 tanks available, decided to stay at Tell el Aqqaqir a few kilometres southeast of the 90th Light until the first light of dawn on 1 July. The 7th Motor Brigade was further south, awaiting dawn too.

Further decoding of *Enigma* messages, always through *Luftwaffe* communications, revealed the forced postponement of the beginning of Rommel's attack, led to detecting the deployment of some Axis units, disclosed the direction of the 15th *Panzer's* attack and forewarned of the *Luftwaffe* bombers' raids[13]. On this basis, Auchinleck prepared to face the main Italo-German effort between El Alamein and Bab el Qattara, tending to isolate the El Alamein *box*, as it had been done at Matruh, not to mention secondary efforts against the *box* and the zone south of Bab el Qattara.

According to the last reconstruction made by the *Panzerarmee*, the British formation on 30 June was the following: the 10th Corps with the 50th British Infantry Division at El Alamein and the 10th Indian Infantry Battalion at Deir al Abyad north, that is west of Deir el Shein; the 13th Corps with the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division in the zone of Bab el Qattara and the 5th Indian Infantry Division at Nabq Abu Dweis south. The sector limit seemed to run north of Bab el Qattara. The 1st Armoured Division was retained in front of the sector of the 13th Corps (Sketch N. 9).

Consequently, to complete an extremely brief initial order issued at 11:30, Rommel arranged to provide each subordinate commander with verbal orders. Those for Navarini, who was summoned just after midday, are synthesized in the historical XXI Corps' diary as follows:

> "The enemy has organised a defence between the coast and the Qattara Depression at the point where it pushes north, that is at the height of El Alamein. They are on a notable fortified line which they have made

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 393.

secure and that is not susceptible to out-flanking. They intend to put up the last resistance to block our way to Alexandria.

The armoured army will begin the frontal break through of the enemy line at 3:00 at night between 30 June and 1 July with the aim of destroying the central stronghold and proceeding to an enveloping movement north of the El Alamein stronghold and south of the stronghold that holds the area close to Qattara Depression.

The XXI Army Corps has the task of surrounding and attacking the El Alamein stronghold. The 90th Light Division will attack the centre of the enemy formation and head north to complete the out-flanking. Behind them, the divisions of the XXI Army Corps will advance, which are earmarked to attack El Alamein from south to north.

The X and the XX Army Corps will carry out a similar manoeuvre against the south stronghold, while the DAK will be ready to pursue the enemy east through the open corridor".

The sequence of the orders given is not known, but from the sketch compiled by the *Panzerarmee* the battle plan appears to be configured in quite a different way. It was probably drawn in the end, after some adaptations. In short, Rommel proposed to burst into the gap existing between El Alamein and Deir Abyad with the 90th Light and the DAK. The first had to wrap around the coastal stronghold from south to reach the coast. The second had to penetrate southeast, cross Ruweisat and head further south to reach Qaret el Himeimat, behind the 13th British Corps. The part reserved for the Italians consisted in frontally engaging the static structures at the sides of the broken stretch, that is to say El Alamein (assigned to the XXI Corps) and Deir el Abyad (assigned to the X Corps), to "cover" the flanks of the corridor of penetration with the *Trento* turned north and the *Brescia* turned to Deir el Shein to secure German forces. The XX Corps was to closely follow the DAK's manoeuvre and occupy Bab el Qattara. The *Littorio* had to keep the 1st British Armoured Division in check. A preliminary thrust of a tactical group of the 15th *Panzer* towards Naqb Abu Dweiss would contribute to causing the wrong impression in the enemy. Different from what was conceived at Matruh, in this case the bulk of the manoeuvre force was concentrated and guided on short reins.

As it has already been mentioned, Auchinleck came to know of the plan. He therefore wanted to wait for Rommel with two surprises: the penetration of the German mass was destined to first meet the combat groups of the 1st and 2nd South African Brigade, then the 1st Armoured Division; the attack direction would find the 18th Indian Brigade at Deir el Shein. In

other words, instead of fighting with the strong against the weak, to use an expression from fencing, Rommel would have to fight with the strong against... the stronger, ready to face him. The reality would be different, but not by much.

In any case, aside from the drawbacks derived from a hurried collection of intelligence about the enemy, one particular above all leaves perplexities: Rommel intended to rally together the break through mass by late evening on the 30th east of Tell El Aqqaqir and begin the attack at 3:00 on 1 July, so that the DAK, whose attack direction was longer, would arrive between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat at dawn. But how could the DAK cross more than 50 kilometres in three hours, at night, in unknown terrain, at the very least meeting up some mines and enemy counterattacks?

Let's also take into account the opposing forces, as it had to appear to the *Panzerarmee* that was equipped with 55 German medium tanks and 70 Italian in all, 330 German guns and 200 Italian, (included in that number about fifty 25-pounder guns from war spoils) 15 armoured cars, 2,000 German infantrymen and 8,000 Italian. In short, the artillery was good but not exceptional, the infantry was limited and tired and the efficient tanks were few - even if their availability could vary considerably depending on repairs. These figures, in and of themselves, have no practical meaning if not compared to how many forces the enemy had drawn up, but it does not appear that the *Panzerarmee* tried to make any estimate of the 8th Army's available forces. Everyone was convinced of only facing what was left of the enemy, defeated and discouraged. Furthermore, Rommel's plan was to face the best enemy units - the 2nd New Zealand and the 1st Armoured - only after placing himself in a position of advantage, i.e. after the envelopment of the 13th Corps had been concluded. In fact, the 8th Army had no less than 15,000 infantrymen, 400 guns, 150 tanks and about a hundred armoured cars in line.

> "In relation to our experience at Matruh", Mellenthin maintained, "I think this plan offered real hope of victory. The German forces were too weak for any hard combat, but were still able to manoeuvre. It is therefore possible that if Rommel had brought his divisions through the British lines in the rear area, he would have thrown the enemy once again into a quick escape"[14].

Anything can happen in war, but some doubt about the feasibility of such a battle plan seems justified.

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[14] VON MELLENTHIN F., *op. cit.*, p. 205.

The resumption of the Italo-German offensive constituted an attempt to pursue the march on Cairo. The rush wore itself out in three days, but gave way to a series of attacks on both sides, intended to take some advantage through local actions. It would conclude on 14 July marking a moment of important strategic decisions.

From the 15th to the 17th, the 8th British Army, feeling like it had regained its equilibrium, passed to the counteroffensive, seeking success in Ruweisat. It had barely missed defeating the enemy and gaining victory at El Alamein before. The failure in reaching their objective was due to the energy of Axis counterattacks and much to the demerit of the performance of British commanders.

After some days, on 22 July, the 8th Army attacked violently, while still astride Ruweisat. Again the Italo-German troops resisted and pushed back the effort, but the unit's wear was tremendous, enough to convince Auchinleck to make another attempt, on the 27th, this time northeast of Ruweisat. After the third failure *"the British commander's will to carry out other attacks had passed"*, commented Rommel[15].

Let's begin with Rommel's first move.

The 1st of July

In the earliest morning the units of the 1st British Armoured Division got moving. The 22nd Brigade went to the eastern extremity of Ruweisat, the Division Headquarters also moved into the zone and the 7th Motorized Brigade went northwest of Naqb Abu Dweiss. All of these movements were accomplished without incident, nor did any danger of it exist. The case of the 4th Armoured Brigade was quite different. Not only had it rested for a few hours at a short distance from the 90th Light, but the resting area coincided exactly with the gathering zone towards which the DAK was moving. It was indeed lucky because the 90th Light left for the attack without being aware of their presence and the DAK, suffering terribly because of the difficulties of moving on rough terrain close to Tell el Aqqaqir during the night, suddenly found itself with the subunits of the two *Panzerdivisionen* so mixed up that they started to fire a series of multicoloured signal flares to orient and extricate themselves. Therefore, the DAK arrived at its assigned zone three hours late. The 4th Brigade could thus take cover behind British lines, though running into some final mishaps. First, it got involved in the 3rd South African Brigade's fire

[15] ROMMEL E., *op. cit.*, p. 205.

against the simultaneous penetration of the 90th Light. Then, having reached Alam el Onsol, the vehicles got stuck in the sand and for most of the day they were unable to move.

At 4:30 the 90th Light got past the "Red Track", but things immediately went wrong, because they found themselves in front of the south-western corner of the defensive perimeter of El Alamein halted by intense barrage and interdiction fire nearby. Being immobilised, they blocked the *Trento* that was riding in its wake (Sketch N. 10). At 8:00 the 7th *Bersaglieri*, that is to say the rest of the XXI Army Corps, faced the western sector of El Alamein, proceeding astride the coastal way, but, due to its small numbers, it was only able to engage the defenders.

As if this were not enough, a heavy British air incursion - one of the many - on the DAK, that was finally preparing to enter into action, raised the German mishaps to the highest pitch. Despite Rommel's continuous spurring, Nehring was only able to begin the manoeuvre at 6:45. The XX Corps[16] left the Alam Abu Busat zone at about 10:00, where it had spent the night, in order to go to Tell el Eisa and be ready to support the DAK and the 10th Corps.

But in the meantime, the 15th *Panzer*, during the outflanking movement south, had met the first obstacle: the Deir el Shein stronghold. It had not been expected and Nehring initially considered if it might not be better to bypass it to achieve the assigned objectives. But, after realizing that this was not an easy task, (the 18th Indian Brigade had artillery and nine *Matilda* tanks) he resolved to eliminate it. Rommel, arriving soon after, approved the decision and began by sending a request for surrender, which was naturally rejected. It was necessary to resign themselves to reconnaissance, especially of the minefields, yet the time spent allowed for the 21st *Panzer* to arrive.

Midday arrived and a rising sandstorm permitted the 90th Light to escape from the violent fire of the El Alamein *box* and go on, while the 21st *Panzer* was mounting the attack to eliminate Deir el Shein. Satisfied,

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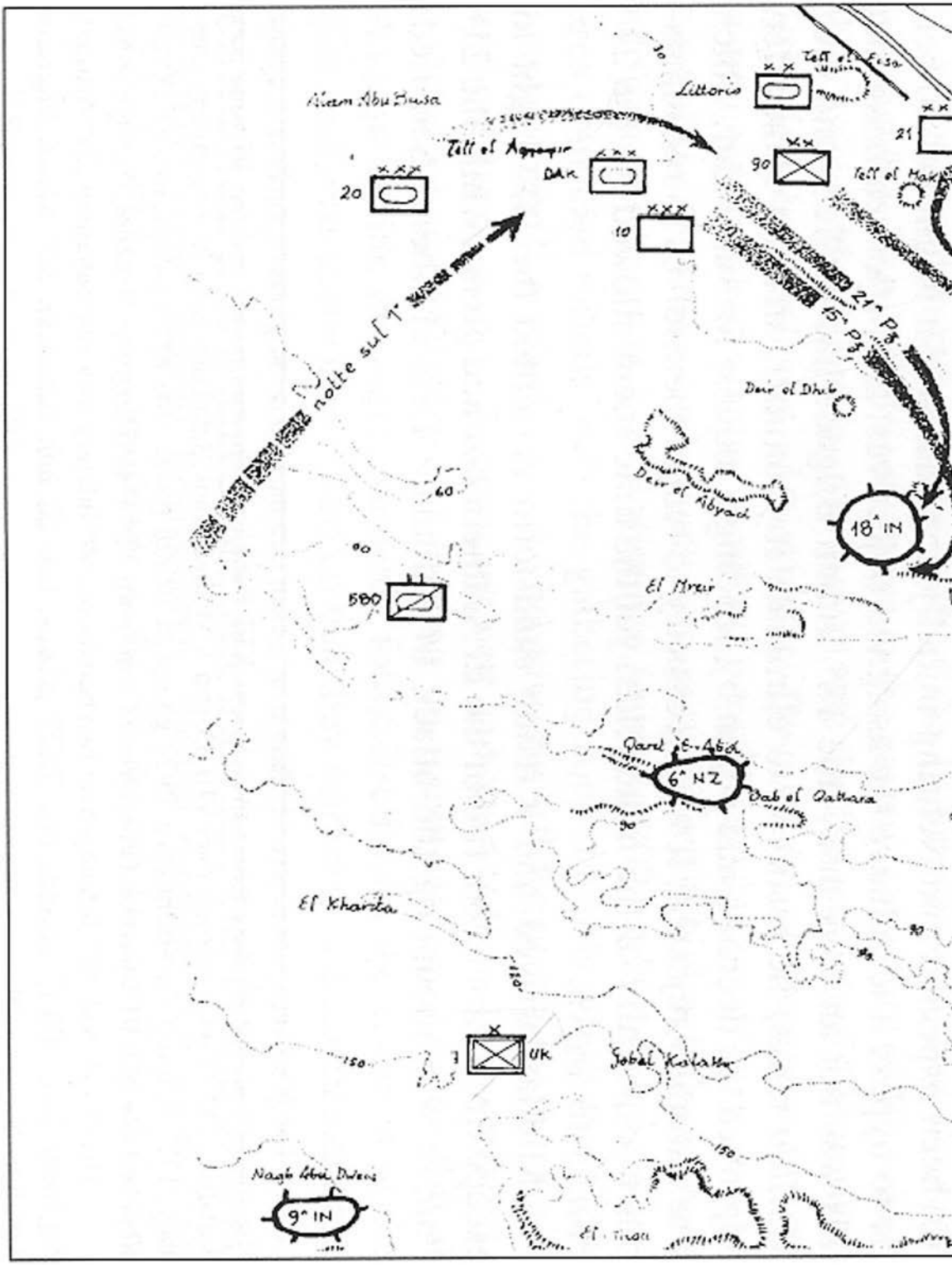
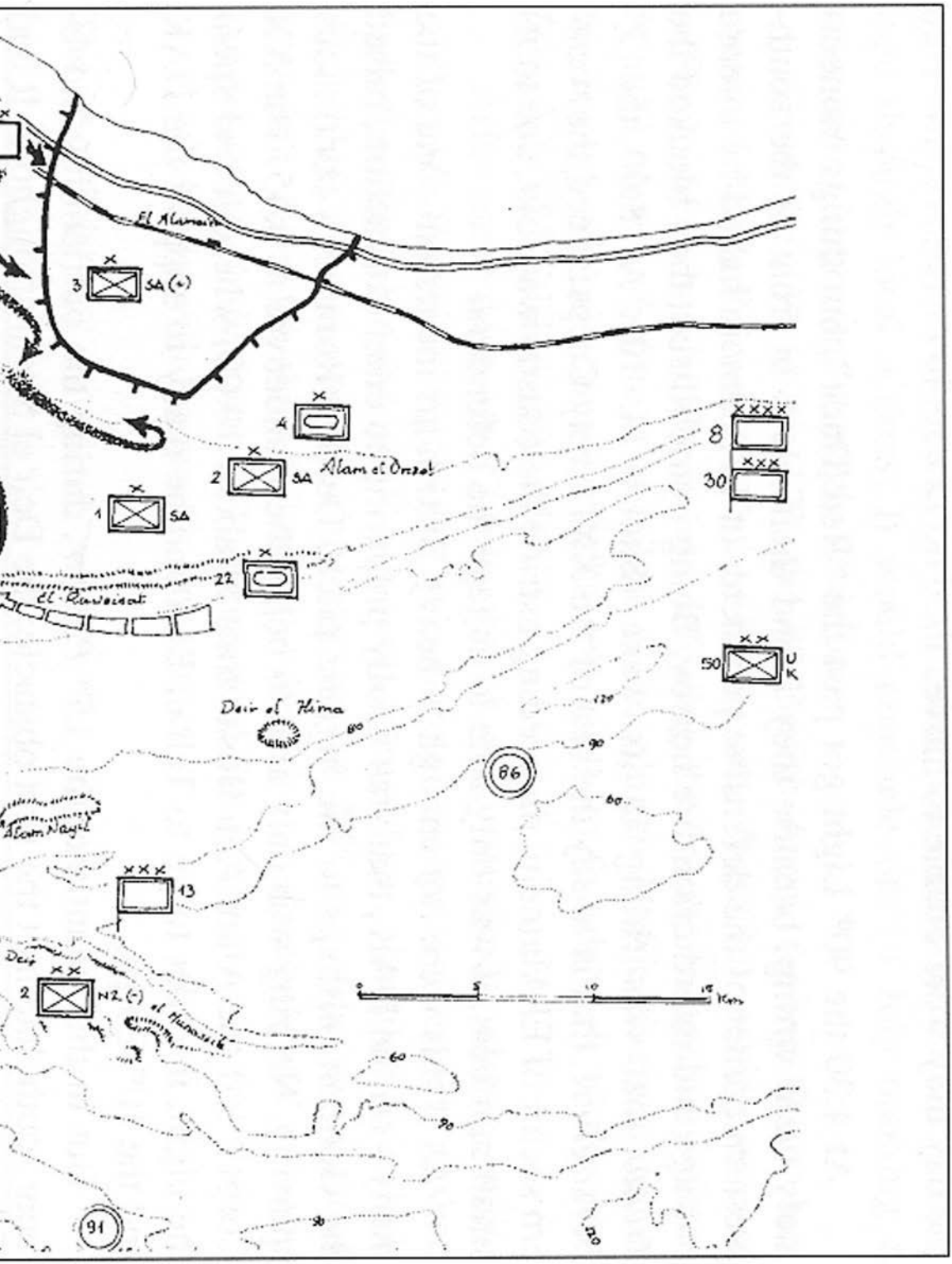
[16] The XX Corps was nearly whole as a unit, even if reduced at some levels of forces and means. The *Ariete* had: the 8th *Bersaglieri* over V and XIII Battalion auto-transported and the III Anti-Tank Battalion; 132nd Tank Regiment over VIII, IX and X Medium Tank Battalions and a 20 mm artillery company; 132nd Artillery Regiment (two 75/27 groups, a 105/28 group, two 90/53 groups, two 75/18 self-propelled groups); III Squadron Group *Nizza Cavalleria*; 32nd Mixed Engineer Battalion, Service units.

The *Trieste* had: 65th Infantry over two battalions, 66th Infantry over two battalions, 21st Artillery Regiment (two 100/17 groups, two 75/27 groups, two 20 mm batteries), 52nd Mixed Engineer Battalion, Service units.

Sketch
"THE EVENTS



N. 10
OF 1 JULY"


El Alamein
3 SA (-)
4
2 SA
Alam el Onsol
1 SA
8
30
22
El Ruweisat
50
Deir el Hima
86
Alam Nayil
13
2 NZ (-)
el Hamra
91

Rommel communicated to Gioda, "*The armoured army attack is proceeding well. In the afternoon we intend to pursue the enemy east. The X Army Corps has to send a division to the zone immediately...* [Deir el Abyad]"[17], and to Navarini, at 14:10, "*The enemy positions have been broken near (...). The C.T.A. is attacking (...) in direction south-southwest. The 90th Light (...) towards northeast. The XXI Army Corps must lengthen the left wing (...)*"[18].

It was obvious that the timing was off, but the absence of any enemy response left room for hope. While the existence of the Deir el Shein stronghold was a surprise and the presence of the 1st South African Brigade behind the 21st *Panzer's* positions a bother, they could be considered among the unpredictable events that always arise in battle.

At 16:00 Mancinelli reported to the High Command that the 90th Light had already begun the conversion north-eastwards, while the DAK was slowed by the static structures on its left flank. However, orders had been given enabling the XX Corps and the *Littorio* to pass to the pursuit that had to be pushed to 20 kilometres from Alexandria. Aside from the fuel situation in the Italian divisions, the circumstances presented an even more complex picture. The 90th Light not only continued to be under fire from the El Alamein *box*, but went on to be caught in that of the 1st and 2nd South African Brigades, so that, after a few kilometres, it was forced to stop in a terrible state of disarray. Nor could the 7th *Bersaglieri* help much. Although supported by the 3rd *Celere* Artillery and by another 105 artillery group, they achieved only limited success on the western side of the defence area due to an intense enemy artillery barrage.

The *Brescia* should have gone to Deir el Abyad but, like many other units, found itself literally stuck in the sand west of Tell el Aqqaqir. If the tanks suffered from such terrain, the motor vehicles were even worse off. At about noon, General Lombardi informed Gioda that the vehicles would not be free for another six hours. In fact, it was not until the late evening

[17] Historical diary of the XXI Army Corps, phonogram transmitted from the army at 12:15 and received at 17:05. The X Corps had the *Brescia* with the II/19th Infantry and the 1st *Celere* Artillery (two 100/17 groups and one 75/27) in place; the *Pavia* with the II/27th Infantry and the 26th Artillery (two 100/17 groups and one 75/27); the 9th *Bersaglieri* over two battalions and the XLIX/16th Artillery with a 105/28 group.

[18] Historical diary of the XXI Army Corps, phonogram transmitted by the army at 14:10. The XXI Corps had the *Trento* with the II/62nd Infantry and the 24th Artillery (one 100/17 group and one 75/27); the 7th *Bersaglieri* over two battalions; the 2nd *Celere* Artillery; the III/24th Artillery with a 105/28 group and the XXXII Sapper Battalion.

that the division was able to line the motor vehicles up on more solid ground, at the rear of the positions. As compensation, the 18th Indian Brigade was in serious difficulty at Deir el Shein.

At 17:30 Rommel intervened personally to resolve what appeared to be an embarrassing halt. He went to the head of his own armed echelon and of *Kampstaffel* Kiehl to reinforce the German wedge, but not even his direct presence was able to concretize a force able to break through the Anglo-South African artillery barrage, also because the Royal Air Force launched another of its never-ending air strikes. Although the Axis had restored a sort of balance in the skies, the situation began to crystallise. This was also because Auchinleck had decided on the action for the 1st Armoured Division.

As a matter of fact, the first order given to General Lumsden at about 13:20 had no effect: the 4th Armoured Brigade got involved freeing the tanks buried in the sand and the 22nd could count on 18 efficient tanks. They would have truly been an immense help for the 18th Indian Brigade, if it were not for the fact that the armoured cars sent on reconnaissance probably went in the wrong direction and returned to report that everything was calm at Deir el Shein. So the 22nd Brigade did not move. At 16:30 Auchinleck issued a new order and this time the Brigade intervened, falling in directly to the rear of the 15th *Panzer*, south of Ruweisat. In the confusion that followed, the English tank crews saw hundreds of Indians escape from Deir el Shein and thought to have completed the task. So they returned to the line of departure. Actually, the 18th Indian Brigade, already partially overcome, surrendered definitively at about 19:00.

At 20:00 Rommel ordered the German troops penetrated into the British defensive system to stop and dig into their conquered positions. According to what was reported by Mancinelli, who had always been in close contact, the assessment of the situation was favourable:

> "Further details are missing", he telegraphed to the High Command, "about the operations. On the whole it is possible to say that the breakthrough of the enemy's position has been completely successful and the way is open to further advance. Tomorrow morning operations will continue to eliminate the El Alamein pocket. It seems probable that the opposing forces, now positioned south of the point of breakthrough, will move during the night south and east (...)"[19].

[19] DSCSAS, telegram 3426 dated 1/7/1942, 20:30 hours, by Col. Mancinelli.

Navarini had less faith. The historical diary of the XXI Corps records the fact that not even the DAK was able to achieve the hoped for results in its movement southeast, *"The wedge that the army had formed in the enemy battle arrangements between the northern stronghold* [El Alamein] *and the south stronghold* [Deir el Shein] *was not pushed far enough to close the enemy strongholds behind them"*.

Rommel had to feel like he was on tenterhooks. *"The road for Alexandria"*, he wrote, *"needed to be opened as soon as possible. The British became stronger with every hour in the threatened sector"*[20]. He suddenly ordered the weakened 90th Light to irrupt towards the coastal road by moonlight. It was a useless and bloody attempt. The British fire barrier quickly put an end to the move.

South of Bab el Qattara calm reigned for the whole day. Auchinleck had originally thought of employing some columns reinforced with artillery to hit the exposed flank of the enemy that was expected to attack Deir el Shein. Nevertheless, the measure, carried out by a task force from the 2nd New Zealand Division sent north at 14:30, ended up being an empty raid that missed meeting the enemy.

At nightfall the two enemies tried to take an account of the first day of battle.

Auchinleck judged the results as *"not unfavourable"*, admitted the *"temporary Italo-German penetration"* of the Deir el Shein stronghold and underlined the success (as it was held) of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. In his opinion, according to what he telegraphed to London, they were to expect a reiteration of a huge effort between El Alamein and Bab el Qattara, in the direction of El Imayid in the near future.

As a consequence, he made up his mind to use the 30th Corps to block the penetration and counterattack in a resolute way from the south and southeast with units from the 13th Corps. However, before issuing more specific orders he wanted to wait for Rommel's move. Two pieces of news probably contributed to supporting Auchinleck's serenity. The first, obtained from two DAK officers that had been taken prisoner and then escaped during the combat at Deir el Shein, indicated that the 21st *Panzer* had only 37 working tanks and the 15th less than 17. The second, coming from the decoding of *Enigma* messages, revealed that the Royal Air Force incursions were terribly deadly for Axis divisions, causing losses, misdi-

[20] ROMMEL E., *op. cit.*, p. 191.

rection and delays in movement. "*The Desert Air Force ruled the battlefield*", confirmed von Mellenthin[21].

Rommel was prey to contrasting feelings. On the one hand, he could not ignore the growing, even if slowly, reinforcement of the adversary. On the other, he could not disregard some good news. Auchinleck had dismissed Ritchie, thus there was a crisis of command. The *Mediterranean Fleet* had cleared out of Alexandria, thus there were relevant fears about the development of the Axis offensive. Mussolini had arrived in Libya, thus there was hope for a boost in reinforcements from Italy. The fight at Deir el Shein had procured 2,000 prisoners and 30 British guns - but caused the loss of 18 *Panzers*. The single enemy counterattack had not amounted to much. He concluded that "*the British seem to have no more self-confidence and, as far as it appeared, they were preparing to retreat*". Consequently, he resolved to persist in the research of a solution of short term force, "*firmly convinced that a vast breakthrough on the part of my troops would spread panic in the enemy lines*"[22].

Von Mellenthin, on the other hand, observed gloomily that the hopes for victory vanished on 1 July. The only card left to play was a counter-manoeuvre, but unfortunately the army was letting itself get entangled in a wearing battle and Lumsden's 1st Armoured Division had received the huge gift of an entire day to reorganise[23].

The first unforeseen event took place before the new day dawned. An air bombing threw the DAK into trouble, above all its services, and violently brought the *Trieste* to its knees, burning or damaging about sixty of its already scarce vehicles. "*The whole division*", reported De Stefanis to the High Command, "*can transport a company reinforced with a group of mortars for each regiment*"[24]. The serious consequences would be felt for days.

In the afternoon, at 16:30, Mussolini summoned Cavallero to Berta to announce his promotion to Marshal of Italy. The promotion was in the air but what happened behind the scenes was interesting.

The Duce had announced the capitulation of Tobruk on 21 June, following the offer to surrender made to the commander of the XXI Corps, in order to create the idea of a primarily Italian success. Hitler's retort was immediate. The following day German radio reported (the very well

[21] VON MELLENTHIN F., *op. cit.*, p. 161.
[22] ROMMEL E., *op. cit.*, pp. 191-192.
[23] VON MELLENTHIN F., *op. cit.*, p. 161.
[24] Historical diary of the XX Armed Corps, telegram 2/0835 dated 2/7/1942, 8:35 hours.

deserved) promotion of Rommel to field marshal, and in so doing underlined his determining impulse.

Inevitably, the problem arose of an analogous measure for Cavallero and Bastico in Rome. In a meeting at *Palazzo Venezia* Ciano expressed himself caustically in these regards, but realized that Mussolini *"is very embittered about the fact that the battle takes Rommel's name and that it appears more like a German victory than an Italian one. Also the nomination of Rommel as field marshal (...) is cause for much bitterness for the Duce"*[25]. After some hesitation, when Mussolini arrived in Libya, he suddenly decided to only promote Cavallero[26].

The promotion was not liked. *"A completely negative effect"*, Ciano noted. *"The nomination gathered unanimous dissent especially in military circles"*. It had nothing to do with jealousy, as some have insinuated. Actually, criticisms about his character had long existed and they were tough[27]. Bastico was promoted on 10 August, after having decided the new regulations to adopt for northern Africa.

The 2nd of July

At the first light of 2 July the 90th Light attacked again and almost immediately had to give up going forward because of the absolute inability to overcome the enemy's fierce fire barrier. Acting on this impossibility to break through, Rommel gave new orders to Nehring. The DAK had to head east, astride Ruweisat, and turn in the direction of the coast after seven kilometres passing east of Alam el Onsol, in order to bypass the

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[25] CIANO G., *Diario*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1980.

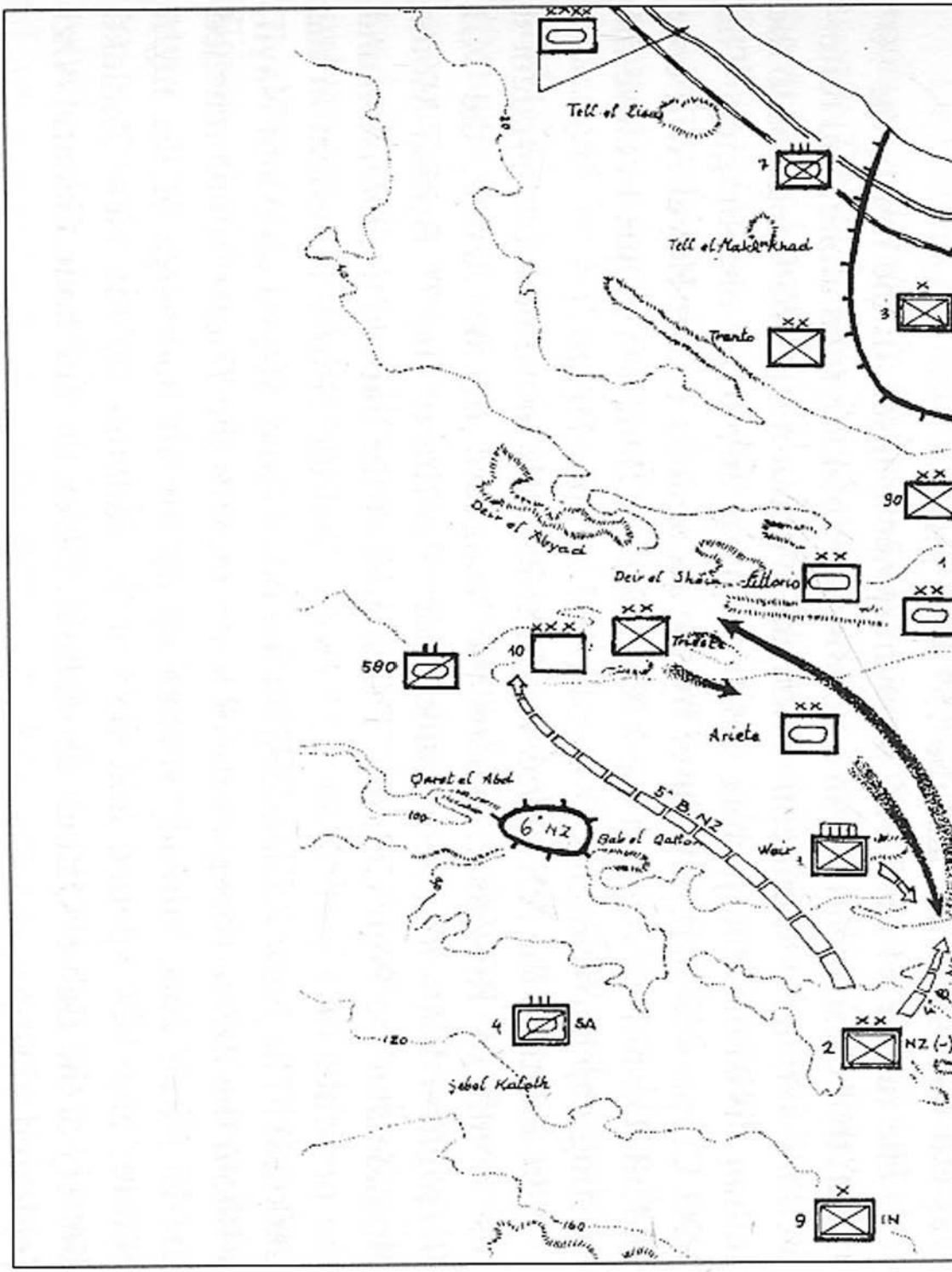
[26] General Magli, officer at the Supreme Command, sent a personal letter to Cavallero on 30 June, touching on the subject in these terms: *"(...) Further to what I needed to communicate to you about the promotion to Marshal, also for Exc. Bastico, I think it is timely to add that yesterday morning, while accompanying him to Guidonia, I asked the Duce for the authorisation to send the rank badges so that he might deliver them to you personally, Excellency, and to Exc. Bastico: I got authorisation. So tomorrow I will send them to Commendatore De Cesare, with a request to deliver them to the Duce (...)"* (Cavallero's Diary, dated 1/7/1942).

In the morning of 1 July, Mussolini had sent this telegram to the King: *"I feel the promotion of General Ugo Cavallero to Italian Marshal is necessary for obvious reasons. The decree will first be subject to Your Majesty's signature. I am certain that this measure will have Your Majesty's approval. It is my belief that the promotion is amply deserved. Mussolini"*. (Cavallero's Diary, dated 1/7/1942, telegram 31329 same date, 10:20 hours). Apart from the use of the indicative in place of the subjunctive in the last sentence, Mussolini's formal misconduct in regard to the King is obvious.

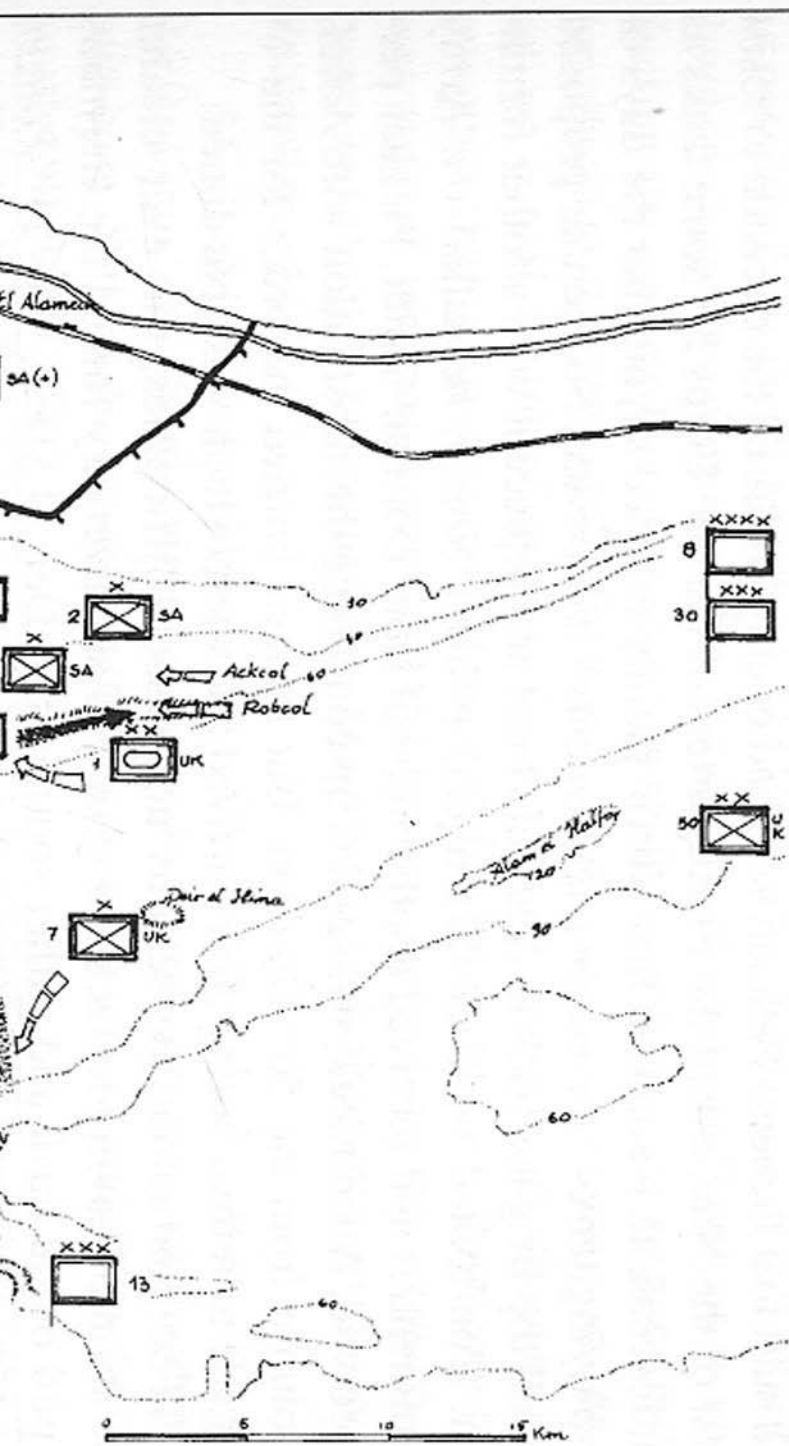
[27] CIANO G., *op. cit.*, p. 635. *"General Cavallero"*, the then Cavalry inspector wrote in his diary, *"has been promoted to Marshal! This has not awoken a very favourable impression"*. (CARLO CERIANA MAYNERI, *Parla un commandante di truppe*, Naples, Rispoli, 1947, p. 98).

Sketc

"THE EVEN



ch N. 11
TS OF 2 JULY"



reaction of the two South African brigades. Then the concentric action would take place against the El Alamein stronghold: the XXI Corps from west and southwest, the 90th Light from south and the DAK from east.

It was a remarkable change from the initial plan to envelop the 13th Corps. Evidently, Rommel had to convince himself that the bulk of the defence was in the Ruweisat zone. Nevertheless, although he wanted to find a solution to the battle towards northeast, it was necessary to secure his forces against anything that might come from south.

The orders received by Gioda and De Stefanis laid out the transfer of the X Corps from the El Wishka zone to the El Mreir positions and the XX Corps from the Saniet el Miteiriya zone to the area of Alam Nayil and of Deep Well - this was the name written on British maps. But the aim of these movements was to protect the DAK's action.

In the meantime, Auchinleck was convinced that the enemy wanted to gather forces for a massive attempt at breaking through against El Alamein and that is was necessary to prevent it. The best thing, actually the only thing to do, was a counterattack in the direction of Sidi Abd el Rahman, in order to envelop the entire *Panzerarmee*. Once this point was fixed, it became a luxury to keep the units immobilised in a sterile static defence. Thus he arranged for the 5th Indian Division to recover the 9th Brigade from Naqb Abu Dweiss and that the 2nd New Zealand Division to prepare to withdraw from Bab el Qattara in due time. For the moment, however, this last stronghold had to work as a manoeuvre axis for the New Zealanders' action.

The fighting started just after 15:00 when the DAK moved east, along Ruweisat (Sketch N. 11). Simultaneously, by chance, the British initiative also got underway. Neither of the two initiatives had time to develop into action. The frontal engagement nullified both plans. However, it nullified them in favour of the British.

Almost the entire southern arrangement of the 8th Army had changed attitude on the basis of Auchinleck's orders. The 9th Indian Brigade had withdrawn to Qaret el Himeimat and the control of the sector south of Bab el Qattara had been taken on by the 4th South African Armoured Car Regiment.

The 7th Motorized Brigade, after a circular move, had been placed to the left of the 1st Armoured Division. The 2nd New Zealand Division had sent a strong column north under the command of General Weir. After orders and counterorders, it was placed near the eastern side of Alam Nayil, with a view to firing against Ruweisat with its artillery and covering the bulk of the division, ready at Deir el Munassib. The 6th Brigade stayed at Bab el Qattara.

In this way the DAK met up with not only the 1st Armoured Division and the 7th Motor Brigade, but also the battery fire of the New Zealanders from south. The 15th *Panzer* was the most exposed to the British fire and, consequently, it suffered heavy damages. At the same time, the 21st had to face the onslaught of *Grant* tanks and was unable to overcome the resistance of the *Robcol*, a column of the 10th Indian Division entrenched in the extreme west of Ruweisat and supported by the South African Artillery.

It was true that the 1st South African Brigade found itself off to such a bad start that General Pienaar, who had openly criticised the decision to resist west of the Nile, asked the Headquarters of the 30th Corps for some tanks as reinforcement, a solution that Norrie plainly rejected saying that the days of employing tanks *"for minor engagements"* had passed. So Pienaar proposed to pull the Brigade back to Alam el Onsol and replace it with another formation. Confronted with another rejection from Norrie, he called the Army Commander and received another refusal from Dorman-Smith. Pienaar persisted with Auchinleck, who ended up conceding the substitution with *Ackol*, a column from the 50th Division. But Pienaar hurried the order for the 1st Brigade to retreat before *Ackol* arrived and the position was abandoned.

The confusion, the serious unforeseen difficulties, the ever clearer sensation of having to face too strong of an adversary forced the Germans to pull out at dusk and gather southeast of Deir el Shein. The 21st *Panzer* was left with 20 tanks, and the 15th with just 6.

The failure of the DAK brought general upset. In the north, the 90th Light, that clearly was not in a position to open the road alone, had reiterated the attempt without conviction and without result. With regards to the Italian divisions, the picture did not appear any more encouraging. The XXI Corps was partially upset by the incursions of the Royal Air Force and all it could do was put the XXXII Sapper Battalion in line to close the existing gap between the 7th *Bersaglieri* and the *Trento*.

In addition, the XX Corps was late. Its wide movement had brought it just south of Ruweisat, where the vanguard of the *Ariete*, the XII *Bersaglieri* Battalion, soon came under the fire of the 7th British Motor Brigade and the Weir Column. The arrival of the bulk of the Division and the presence of a part of the 15th *Panzer* led the British to retreat in the darkness. The New Zealanders, on the other hand, stayed on Alam Nayil, without the *Ariete* being aware of it. As regards the *Trieste,* it had reached the El Mreir zone, already shaken up by the air bombings of the night before, and was spotted and shot at by cannons by the New Zealand Battery at the Bab el Qattara stronghold. Given the late hour, General Azzi preferred to stop.

Finally the X Corps arrived at the hills of El Mreir with the II/27th of the *Pavia*, the II/20th of the *Brescia* and the 9th *Bersaglieri*.

This was the situation at nightfall.

The 3rd of July

Rommel felt the match slipping from his hands. The morning of the 3rd he sent an appeal to the High Command to send him as many battalions as possible from the X and the XXI Corps. The flimsiness of the infantry divisions was so serious that they not only had serious difficulties in conducting the actions but were also materially unable to take responsibility for adequate stretches of the front. As a consequence, it was impossible to set up a real centre of gravity for the attack. Above all, they had to renounce their plan to surround the 13th British Corps. All they could do was proceed with the effort: the DAK had to move eastwards to reach the coast and the XX Corps towards Deep Well to isolate at least the New Zealanders.

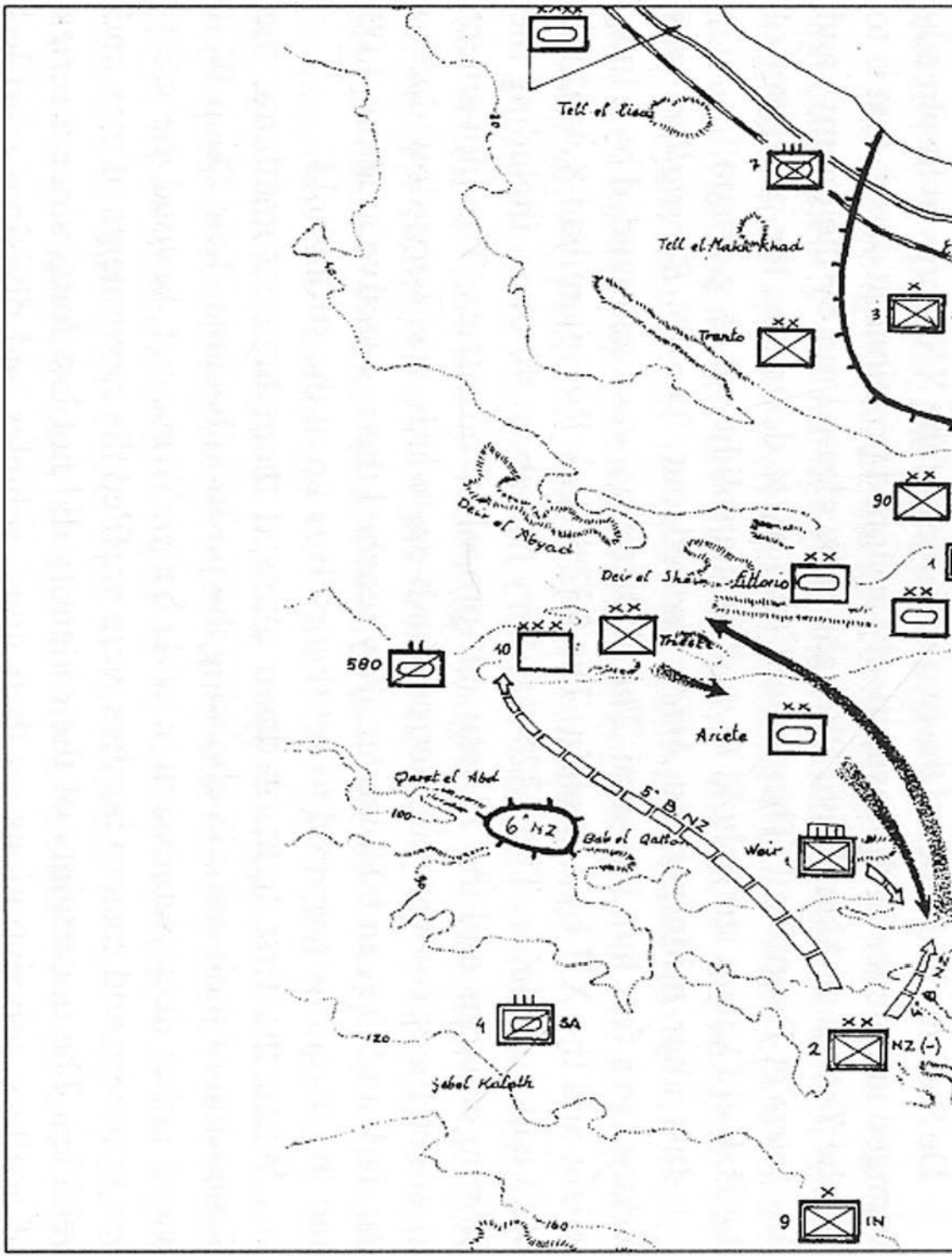
At 9:15 a bombardment by *Stukas* paved the way for the *Afrikakorps* and shortly afterwards the *Panzerdivisionen* left the departure base. But, in the meantime, dramatic events were underway further south (Sketch N.12).

De Stefanis had ordered the two divisions of the XX Corps to be already arranged in defence in the respectively assigned positions at dawn, that is to say the *Trieste* at Alam Nayil (thought to be cleared out by the enemy) and the *Ariete* at Deep Well. They would then try to determine the perimeter of the Bab el Qattara stronghold as well as the solidity of its garrison.

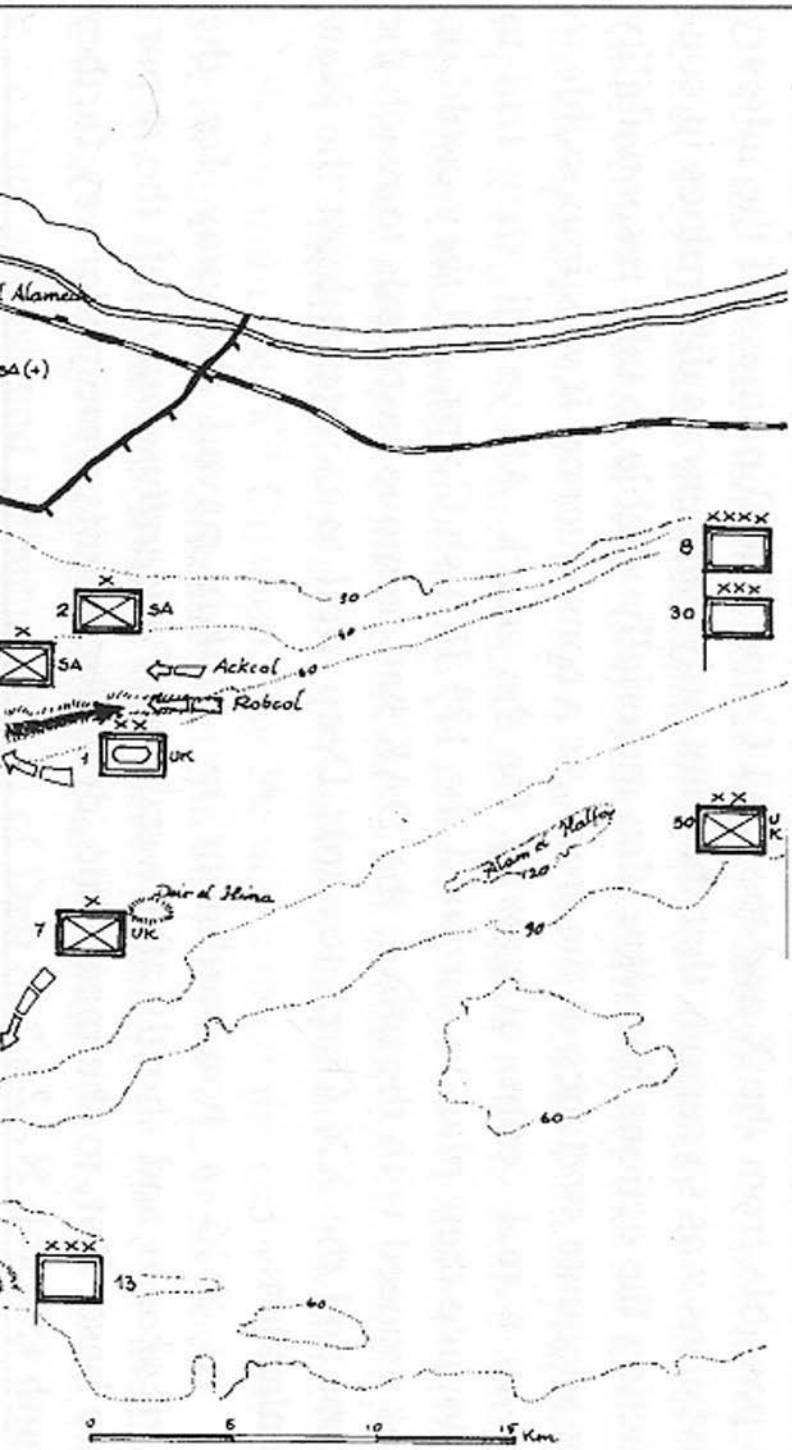
Just after midnight the *Ariete* moved out. The 8th *Bersaglieri* was reduced to a few hundred men. The V Battalion was commanded by a lieutenant and the XII by a captain. The 132nd Tank Regiment had 8 working M13 tanks available. The 132nd Artillery had about 40 guns, including the 88 mm cannons and the 75 mm self-propelled howitzers. The movement to cover the six-seven kilometres south-eastwards was very slow due to the dark and the sand. However, they reached their objective at about 4:00 and the divisions prepared to set themselves up at the stronghold.

When the first light of dawn allowed them to see something, the dimension of their error in choosing the position became clear. Deep Well was a rather deep depression, a wide basin. Worse yet, beyond the western, southern and eastern borders were profiled the movements of men and vehicles. The uncertainty of their identity did not last long, since a series of artillery concentrations on their guns, vehicles and divisions clarified

Sketch
"THE EVENT



N. 12
S OF 3 JULY"



beyond doubt that the *Ariete* was in hot water. At 15:15 General Arena sent a very calm yet eloquent message to the Headquarters of the Army Corps:

> "We have reached the prescribed zone. We have had to assume W, S, E fronts because numerous British elements are visible in these three directions. Artillery fire is coming from E, W and N. The 15th and 21st German Divisions are 8 km west of us. I cannot see the *Trieste*. Given the available force in *bersaglieri* and the necessity of having fronts originating in every possible direction, the Division's situation remains delicate. Therefore please consider if it is opportune to have the *Trieste* advance and report the *Ariete's* situation to the German High Command. In this moment two German armoured cars from the 15th and the 21st have arrived beside me"[28].

Arena's hopes for an intervention from above were misplaced because the phonogram reached the Headquarters of the XX Corps at 8:00, almost three hours later, because the DAK was already directed in an extreme attempt to resolve the battle east and because the *Trieste* had not yet received the order to take up the advance to Alam Nyal[29] and had therefore remained near El Mreir.

The isolation and the precarious tactical situation of the *Ariete* were quickly perceived by the enemy. The first to open fire was the Weir Column from Alam Nayil, which easily won the artillery duel, the Italian battery being in grave difficulty in observing their shooting. The losses of personnel, out in the open, were serious. Then the vehicles of the 4th British Armoured Brigade appeared from northwest. At 8:00 Arena communicated to De Stefanis, "*I confirm that we are alone under intense, continuous artillery fire coming from west, north and east (...)*"[30]. Then the 4th New Zealand Brigade appeared in the south, sent by Deir el Munassib, structured in two columns (the 19th Battalion with the 14th Field Artillery and the 20th Battalion with the 5th Field Artillery) supported by armoured vehicles. The Italian M13 tanks opposed the 4th Armoured Brigade in an obviously unequal fight. The V *Bersaglieri* Battalion tried to deploy fac-

[28] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps.

[29] The historical diary of the Division registers under the date of 2 July: *"About evening an order was transmitted from the Army Corps Headquarters, through the Ariete Division, (...) to aim for the Alam Nayil objective. The order, delivered to a division officer, did not reach the Headquarters in time"*.

[30] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps. The 4th Armoured Brigade had 18 *Grants*, 33 *Stuarts*, and 12 *Valentines* in line that day; but it is not known which unit was sent against the *Ariete*.

ing northeast. The New Zealanders engaged the XII Battalion which was left with *one* machine gun and no regular grenades for the 47/32 guns. At about 10:00 the struggle was brought to an end. The *Ariete* lost 531 men, 36 guns of various calibres and 55 motor vehicles[31].

While the rest of the defeated Division retreated as best as they could to El Mreir, De Stefanis ordered the *Ariete* to reorganise what it still had to the rear of the *Pavia*[32], whereas the *Trieste*, whose motor vehicles were mixed in with those of the *Pavia*, had to place itself along the length of the X Corps south-eastwards, rather than continuing to Alam Nyal.

The DAK's action had not made progress during the morning also because the 15th *Panzer* was forced to stay in place to guarantee the formation of the *Trieste*. Although struck by the *Ariete* disaster, Rommel said to Nehring at 12:50, *"I am asking for an energetic attack of the entire DAK"*, entrusting the protection of the southern flank to the scout groups. The *Littorio* and the 90th Light had to be ready to intervene.

Not only did the 21st *Panzer* fail to obtain any concrete results north of Ruweisat, but it was not able to inflict losses on the 1st and 2nd South African Brigades either. The 15th *Panzer* was blocked right away by 56 tanks from the 22nd Armoured Brigade and the bulk of the 4th British Armoured Brigade; but at about 16:00, pushed by new requests from Rommel, they lurched forward and occupied Alam Baoshaza. It was the maximum penetration and also the most extreme effort. The 1st British Armoured Brigade had lost 39 tanks.

In the meantime, the 5th New Zealand Brigade, with 24 25-pounder guns from the 6th Field Artillery, 16 6-pounder anti-tank guns and 16 anti-aircraft *Bofors*, headed for El Mreir to cut into the flank of the Italo-German arrangement. At 16:00 the vanguard arrived in sight of the objective. The X Corps quickly organised itself in defence. The two *Brescia* battalions occupied the northern border of the Depression. The two from the 9th *Bersaglieri* were positioned slightly eastwards. After a short preparation of artillery, the attack developed both on the sides of the Depression and across it, but they quickly had to give up the undertaking due to the *Brescia*'s intense arrest fire.

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[31] The *Ariete* indicated the loss of 16 47/32 pieces, 6 75/27s, 6 88s, 1 90 and 7 105s. According to British sources the attacker captured 350 prisoners and 44 pieces (16 75s, 11 88s, 12 105s and 5 British 25-pounders).

[32] The *Ariete* could reconstitute immediately a tank platoon and a section of 90 mm guns, which were placed under the 15 *Panzer* control; the V *Bersaglieri* Battalion with a command post platoon and a whole company. 5 officers and 70 *bersaglieri* from the V Battalion and 6 officers and 129 *bersaglieri* from the XII were sent to the rear base (Scaglione B) in groups because they had no more heavy weapons.

At 20:10, Rommel was forced to halt the troops in the positions they had reached. The situation had become worrisome. The German armoured troops, the diamond point in the army, appeared extremely tried. The *Ariete*, the best Italian division, was unusable at the moment. The Italian infantry divisions, which had always declared the scantiness of their structure, had now reached the extreme limit of operational sufficiency. Von Mellenthin remembers bitterly, "*Everyone became aware that the offensive started on 26 May, which had brought such spectacular victories, had unfortunately come to an end*"[33].

From what appears in Rommel's memories, the nearly determining element of the failure had been the *Ariete*, which had otherwise always fought well "*even if under the protection of German artillery and tanks*", as Rommel was quick to point out. The unlucky Deep Well episode had provoked an unexpected disappointment and losses not easy to compensate for. Moreover, it had left the DAK's southern flank in danger and taken the vigour out of Rommel's attack, finally making it clear that you could not count on Italians to overcome a crisis. Along this line of thought, the commander of the army telegraphed Kesselring:

> "With the current fighting force and given the situation with supplies, a large scale attack is not currently possible. We are hardly able to feed the army at night, because the roads are nearly forbidden to us by the enemy air activity (...)".

Then he complained about the little help he received from the allies, citing the *Ariete* incident, where 360 men "*were captured without putting up a resistance worthy of a name*"[34].

At 22:00 Colonel Mancinelli communicated to the High Command that Rommel was assessing the situation during the night, after a thorough examination of the troops and supplies, to decide whether to persist with the offensive or to take a temporary defensive attitude. In any case, he was still convinced of being able to favourably resolve the difficulties hanging over the Axis troops.

That day, naturally with the consent of Mussolini and Cavallero, the High Command authorized the adoption of the name Italo-German Army, (*AIT - Armata Italo-Tedesca*) in place of the previous *Armata corazzata*

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[33] VON MELLENTHIN F., *op. cit.*, p. 162.

[34] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

Africa or *Panzerarmee Africa*. The directive was not issued through formal official communication, though[35].

Among the Italians, above all in the XX Corps, *"the troops morale was left shocked by the actions of the day and especially by the inevitable retreat"*[36]. A comment on the event is thus unavoidable. It is no wonder that a sense of discouragement prevailed, taking into account the unexpected circumstances and the terrain on which the *Ariete* Division had to fight. Let's not forget that two days before *"panic broke out on the front-line of the division (15:30 hours)"*, as reported in the war diary of the [German] 90th Light, *"and was stopped in the nick of time by the intervention of the Division Headquarters and the Chief of Staff"*. The panic was provoked by the increasing British and South African artillery fire that had turned troops and services of the German division to a hasty escape[37].

As to the cause of the event, it seems to be ascribed to the *Ariete*'s halt in a tactically unsuitable area and the delay of the *Trieste*. These causes lack enough details for a specific charge, even if some gaps in leadership and communications are clear. The following day, Mancinelli went to the Headquarters of the XX Corps and telegraphed the High Command, *"(...) the Division was surprised in an extremely unfavourable situation, having been misled by wrong information that authorised the unit to believe that it was covered on the southern and eastern flanks"*[38].

The events of 3 July were considered positively on the British side. Auchinleck's orders for the following day remained essentially unchanged: the 30th Corps had to face the Italo-German thrust, while the 13th had to try to break in on the enemy's flank and rear, cutting his line of operations.

In London, Churchill had won his parliamentary battle in absolute triumph. Wardlaw-Milne's motion was rejected by the House of Commons with 475 votes to 25. Ending the debate, the Premier had spoken at length about the events in the Middle East and about relations between the government and the military leaders. Among other things, he said:

> "I willingly accept, in truth, I am obliged to accept that which the noble Lord (the Count of Winterton) has defined "constitutional responsibility"

[35] The variant derived from an analogous proposal advanced by Mancinelli, who had however suggested the expression *Armata corazzata italo-tedesca* (ACIT) and the explicit formulation by the Supreme Command.

[36] Historical diary of the XX Corps, dated 3/7/1942.

[37] AGAR-HAMILTON J.A.I. and L.C.F. TURNER, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

[38] DSCSAS, telegram 3288 dated 4/7/1942, 23:50 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

for all that has happened. I think I have accomplished it without ever interfering in the technical job of the armies in contact with the enemy. Before the battle began, I asked General Auchinleck to personally assume command since I was certain that during the next month or two nothing would happen in the vast theatre of the Middle East comparable in importance to these conflicts in the western desert and I thought that he was the right man for the job. He brought forth many good reasons for not acting in that capacity and so General Ritchie fought the battle. As I already told the House of Commons last Tuesday, General Auchinleck substituted General Ritchie on 25 June and personally assumed command. We immediately approved that decision, but I must frankly confess that this was not a subject about which we could formulate a definitive judgement as far as the now substituted General was concerned. I desire that the commanders of land, sea and air have the impression that the Government rises as an unshakable rampart between them and every public criticism. They must have the possibility to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. Men can be unfortunate and misfortunes can change. But in any case you will never have generals that can face risks without the impression that they have a strong government behind them. They will not face risks as long as they are not convinced that they do not need to look at what is happening behind them and worry about what is happening in the homeland, as long as they do not have the impression of being able to concentrate their attention on the adversary (...)"[39].

Then, that same morning, just having overcome the parliamentary crisis, he hurried to write to Auchinleck:

"On 1 July we sent you our confidential information that the enemy, after a deceptive attack on your southern flank, would attack the centre of your front, approximately in correspondence to the 18th Brigade, and would then turn north to isolate the El Alamein stronghold. This is exactly what it appears they tried to do.
Are you receiving this inestimably valuable news at right moment and has it ever turned out false? Every telegram of this sort should arrive in your hands without a moment's delay (...)"[40].

Corbett answered him from Cairo. First he assured him that "*every message from a confidential source goes directly to the 8th Army*" and spec-

[39] CHURCHILL W., *op. cit.*, P. IV, Vol. I, pp. 463-464.
[40] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, p. 653.

ified that some arrived in time to be of use to the operations in progress, others not entirely. The 8th Armoured Division was flowing in: two companies of *Valentine* tanks had already reached the 1st Tank Brigade; a complete armoured brigade would be ready for mid-July. The 9th Australian Division, less one brigade (arriving the next day) was in Alexandria and a combat group with 24 25-pounder guns had already left for El Alamein.

Let's say that Churchill's honeyed tone masked a different mood. He wanted to fly to Cairo immediately and Brooke was barely able to persuade him to postpone the trip, at least until things had been stabilised. As a reward, Churchill raged against the Commander in Chief in the Middle East in the cabinet meetings:

> "I did a toilsome task", Brooke wrote in his diary, "defending Auchinleck and highlighting the difficulties of his current position. Without taking into account the fact that every rash substitution in this moment would rapidly bring us to losing Egypt. The Prime Minister was in one of his bad moods and, coming back to the same subject, he asked me where the 750,000 men in the Middle East are, what they are doing and why they are not fighting. Shortly after... with that amazingly likable bearing that characterises him, he came to me and said, *'Brookie, I'm sorry for having been so unfair to Auchinleck and to the men in the Middle East'*"[41].

The 4th of July

Having examined the situation, Rommel decided to pass over to the defence for a while and reorganize the army, especially under the logistical profile. He figured that fifteen days would be sufficient for the job, necessary for enabling 12-15,000 German replacement troops to come in. In the meantime, the Italian Corps could also be completed. He did not have any worries about the tactical plan. The line kept by the units appeared quite favourable because it was restricted and could not be outflanked at short range. Rather, he needed to implement an adequate density of forces for protection against probable counter-offensives. Therefore, it was initially inevitable to move all of the units ahead. Besides, the defensive attitude did not exclude initiatives, like a possible conquest of Naqb Abu Dweis, to support the right of the formation, and the occupation of Siwa, to prevent the enemy from falling to the rear at wide range. Finally, a British attack was

[41] BRYANT A., *op. cit.*, p. 395.

expected in the central sector, and he had inserted the *Littorio* on Ruweisat between the 15th and the 21st *Panzer* for such an event. The *Ariete* had been brought back from the front and retreated to Deir el Dhib for reorganisation. At that moment, it was equipped with 5 tanks and 2 75/27 guns, but awaited an artillery group to be returned by the *Littorio* and the assignment of 30 new tanks arriving for the XX Corps.

Cavallero followed the battle proceedings from a distance. Brought up to date about Rommel's intentions, he delivered the following message to Bastico:

> "The Duce shares and confirms the necessity for a temporary halt to reorganize units and let reinforcements, men and vehicles flow in. This flow will be arranged for with maximum effort, while the Supreme Command is also seeing to it from Italy. The length of the halt is left to the armoured Italo-German Army Command, which will inform the High Command"[42].

To be honest, the tone, if not the substance, of such orders is rather irritating, being transparent in the desire to show that the reins of the campaign were held directly by Rome. Wanting to quibble, you could say that the first part of the message is obvious, knowing full well that the lack of forces *imposed* a halt. Spurring the High Command (cut out of any operational decision) to do everything to provide for replacements could also be considered superfluous, the difficulties with transports being well known. The assurance that the Supreme Command would do as much was vague, but, in truth, the day before Cavallero had announced sending by planes reserves and three infantry battalions, out of the seven already arranged for some time in Italy. Furthermore, on 1 July, in a meeting with Bastico, Kesselring, Fougier and Marchesi, preparations to increase maritime transport security were put in concrete form. Finally, with concern to the duration of the halt, it seems a talk with Rommel would have been better, seeing as how the question depended on what would arrive from Italy and Germany.

Instead, it was Rommel who requested a meeting with Cavallero and Kesselring, and he asked for it that very morning. And perplexity cannot be hidden at the fact that Cavallero had entrusted Bastico and Lieutenant Colonel Montezemolo to go in his stead to the appointment scheduled for the next day, 5 July. The meeting did not take place, but the reason is unknown.

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[42] DSCSAS, telegram 34348/op. dated 4/7/1942, 10:50 hours by Cavallero.

From what has been said, it becomes clear that Rommel had got back or, better yet, had never in fact lost his natural optimism. Though expecting some enemy movement, he did not consider the moment as critical, nor did he believe that the army reinforcement phase could be threatened in any way. Consequently, he established a rearrangement in the dispositions, substituting the X Corps with the DAK and the 90th Light on the salient of Ruweisat and bringing the German divisions between El Mreir and the track to Qaret el Himeimat.

On his side, Auchinleck was always better informed of his adversary's intentions. The decoding of *Enigma* messages from the *Luftwaffe* network had reached the tidy sum of about a hundred a day. Their evident and exceptional operational importance was completed by numerous details about the detachment of the headquarters and the Italo-German Army units, about supplying by land, not to mention the situation and plans of the *Fliegerführer*. "*Moreover, some decoded Enigma messages revealed the tension between Kesselring and Rommel was now high*"[43]. So, in the early morning of the 4th, Auchinleck came to know that Rommel would not attack that day.

The first unit to move on Ruweisat was the 21st *Panzer*, while the 15th spread north to camouflage the retrograde movement, but the 1st Armoured Division noticed it (14:15 hours) and immediately pointed it out to the army[44]. To tell the truth, the interim commander of the 15th *Panzer*, Colonel Craseman, had protested, uselessly, that they were not capable of keeping the zone without reinforcement, considering he was left with only 15 efficient tanks and two days of ammunition. Nehring worrily looked at the intermittent activity of the British armoured vehicles, so much so that at 10:30 he wrote in the DAK war diary that the situation in the 15th *Panzer*'s sector was quite serious. At 15:00 the Division was forced to go back a couple of kilometres under the pressure of the 22nd Armoured Brigade against the 115th Fusiliers Regiment, but the action was rapidly circumscribed, also thanks to the intervention of an 88mm battery. The incident caused a false alarm at the Italo-German Army Headquarters. From the interception of British signals, it seemed, at first, that the 21st *Panzer*, engaged by the 22nd Armoured Brigade during the retreat, had lost 600 men, who had surrendered *en masse*. After some hours it was confirmed that they were dealing with unfounded information, probably deriving from the unorganised retrograde movement of the 115th Fusiliers.

[43] HINSLEY F.H., *op. cit.*, p. 396.

[44] Almost simultaneously, the DAK's war diary commented: *"As expected, the enemy became aware of the backward movement of the 21st* Panzer *and immediately began to exercise strong pressure"*.

It is astonishing that the 21st *Panzer* retreated from Ruweisat before being substituted by the X Corps, as it had been planned, but the operation was suspended owing to an urgent communication from Rommel to Gioda: "*Prepare yourselves for enemy attack from south or southwest. In time repel*"[45]. An hour later he received the order to implement the change only as of 9:00 on the following day. The *Pavia* had to occupy the 90th Light's sector and the *Brescia* get prepared behind the 15th *Panzer,* connecting with the *Trieste* to the right.

The feared attack took place at 21:00, after a short artillery preparation. It was conducted by the 5th New Zealand Brigade. The sector of the II/27th Infantry of the *Brescia* was overrun at El Mreir, astride the track to Naqb Abu Dweiss. The large spaces between the emplacements and the darkness of the night allowed an initial success on some minor strong points, but the Italian counterattacks and barrage fire restored the situation in a couple of hours.

All things considered, no substantial changes were seen on the day of the 4th. However, two considerations can be made. The first regarding the extreme fatigue and scantiness of the Italo-German divisions that, as Rommel reported to the OKW, numbered little more than a thousand men each. The semi-destruction of the *Ariete,* the moment of panic with the 90th Light, the incident of the 115th Fusiliers on Ruweisat were very evident symptoms of the limits reached by human forces. Rommel essentially underlined the insufficiency of supplies of munitions, but it did not seem the worst aspect at that moment, also because that deficiency, undoubtedly serious, could be resolved in a couple of days. The second stress regarded the action of the 30th Corps Headquarters, which apparently took the 1st Armoured Division under its command. Knowing that Rommel's orders for that day did not contemplate any offensive action, knowing about the substitution of the DAK, having clearly observed the retreat of the 21st *Panzer*, having been equally aware of the yielding of the thin German line on Ruweisat, and having a good hundred tanks available in the 1st Armoured Division, it is unclear why Norrie did not take advantage of the favourable moment. Considering the unstable balance of the Italo-German Army, it is conceivable that a local breakthrough might have had truly vast consequences, possibly of determining importance.

Finally, to complete the picture of the importance of the British air raids, it should be mentioned that at dusk on the 2nd and 3rd of July the

[45] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps, phonogram dated 3/7/1942, 13:45 hours; from the AIT.

Royal Air Force carried out nine hundred missions, with a ratio of four to one in relation to Axis aviation. "*Bombs were dropped on troops and on (Italo-German) transport vehicles at an average of ten tons an hour*", specified the official British report[46].

2. The Battle of Tell el Eisa (10-12 July)

On 5 July in the morning, the commander of the AIT had a briefing with the commanders of the army corps to make an assessment. He admitted that, despite the efforts made in the last days of fierce fighting, it was not possible to attain success at a strategic level, as the enemy organisation was obviously much more solid than previously thought. The AIT, having eliminated the Deir el Shein stronghold, was able to insert a wedge between the El Alamein *box* and that of El Qattara, but was not able to complete the envelopment of the two strongholds. That depended on the quickness with which it took advantage of its success, a quickness that had limited the participation of the infantry corps to the weak columns that it was possible to transport by road. The army now took up the defensive to be able to recover everything that was left behind, both the flow of reserves and reinforcements. As soon as the losses were levelled out and reorganised, it would take the offensive again. In the current circumstances, however, it was extremely important to know how to maintain the achieved positions against possible and foreseeable British counterattacks. In particular, it was important to preserve the bulge which represented the indispensable premise for the continuation of the effort.

Maximum recourse to real or decoy minefields, (also using British mines) foxholes, deployment of fake 88 mm guns, i.e. field fortification structures and deception and camouflage techniques, stood out among the measures adopted to pass over to the defence.

Yet Rommel adapted badly to ceding the initiative to the enemy or also, more simply, to giving them time. "*He*", Mancinelli reported, "*continues to view the current situation with absolute confidence and maintains being capable of picking up the movement again*"[47]. But the recovery of an attack mass that would allow manoeuvring against the 2nd New Zealand Division in order to take away the worries on the right wing (the most deeply rooted thought in Rommel at that moment) was not easy. The

[46] PLAYFAIR I.S.O., *op. cit.*, p. 343.

[47] DSCSAS, telegram 33291 dated 5/7/1942, 23:50 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

movement of the X Corps between El Alamein and Ruweisat uncovered some obstacles. The divisions were truly anxious and worn and the persistency with which they asked for the intervention of the hierarchical superiors was dictated by truly serious difficulties. The historical diary of the High Command annotates under the date of 5 July, "*The requests from the units are ever more pressing (accompanied by the expressions "as soon as possible", "most urgent", "immediately"); the answer to one Headquarters was: "We fully understand your needs but you must make a great effort"*. So that the AIT was forced to see all its divisions in line, a long frail sand-coloured line (Sketch N. 13).

Mussolini was also aware of the strong existing uneasiness. He went around Cirenaica a bit. He was in Tobruk. He visited the arriving divisions, heard the news from the front. On the 5th he wrote down some personal remarks.

Apart from the obvious order to speed up the arrivals from Italy as much as possible and the request to bring forth what existed, "*mobile or movable*", from Tripolitania, "*doing what is necessary in a singular moment such as this: the impossible*", he arranged for the transfer to the front of the larger part of the anti-air battery from behind the lines, because "*the nervousness that has started to mark the headquarters and the troops of our line, exposed to repeated serious attacks by enemy aviation, deserves greater consideration*"[48].

For some days both sides reorganised. Some British attempts fizzled out achieving no concrete results, like the action that the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 9th Indian Brigade started on the 5th in the morning from Bab el Qattara to Sidi Abd el Rahman. They reached the Minqar Wahla zone but they had to abandon it on 7 July because of an attack by the *Kampstaffel* and units of the *Littorio*, or the raid launched by a column of the 4th Armoured Brigade up to Fuka.

Auchinleck therefore reached the conclusion that there was little probability of being able to cut into the Italo-German bulge from south, in order to isolate Rommel's entire army. In addition, he was so unhappy with General Norrie's substantial inactivity that he decided to substitute him with General Ramsden (previously commander of the 50th British Division until 6 July) in the command of the 30th Corps.

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[48] DSCSAS dated 5/7/1942. He who, on the other hand, flaunted quite another state of mind (ignoring whether it was truly for conviction or a misunderstood sense of "caring", or even just to flatter Mussolini, as had already occurred during the campaign in Greece) was Cavallero. On 7 July Ciano wrote in his diary: "Cavallero, on a short visit to Libya, is one hundred percent optimistic about the future resumption of operations. He is sure that the superiority of the Axis forces will lead us immediately to Alexandria and, in a short time, to Cairo and to the Canal (...)" (G. CIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 636).

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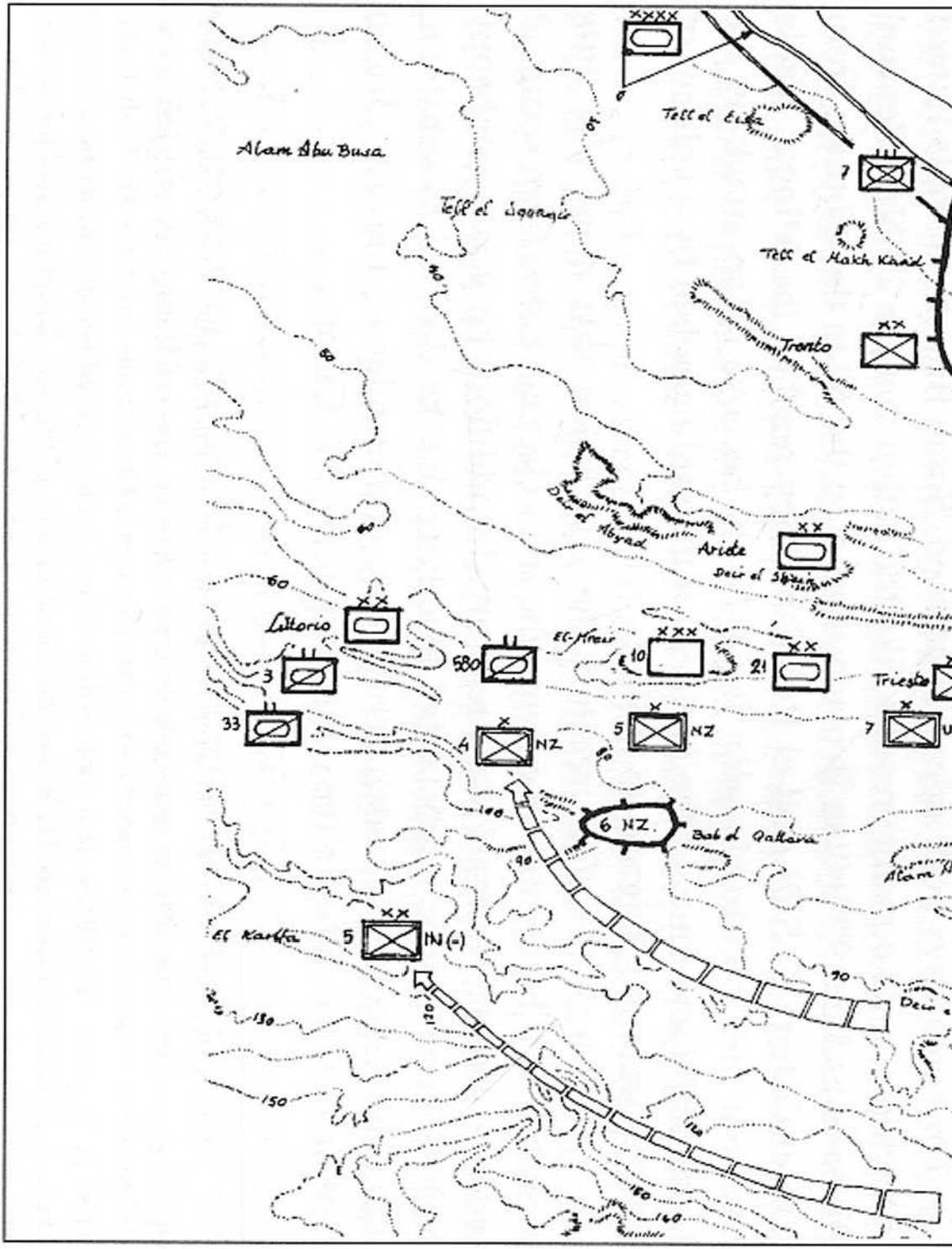

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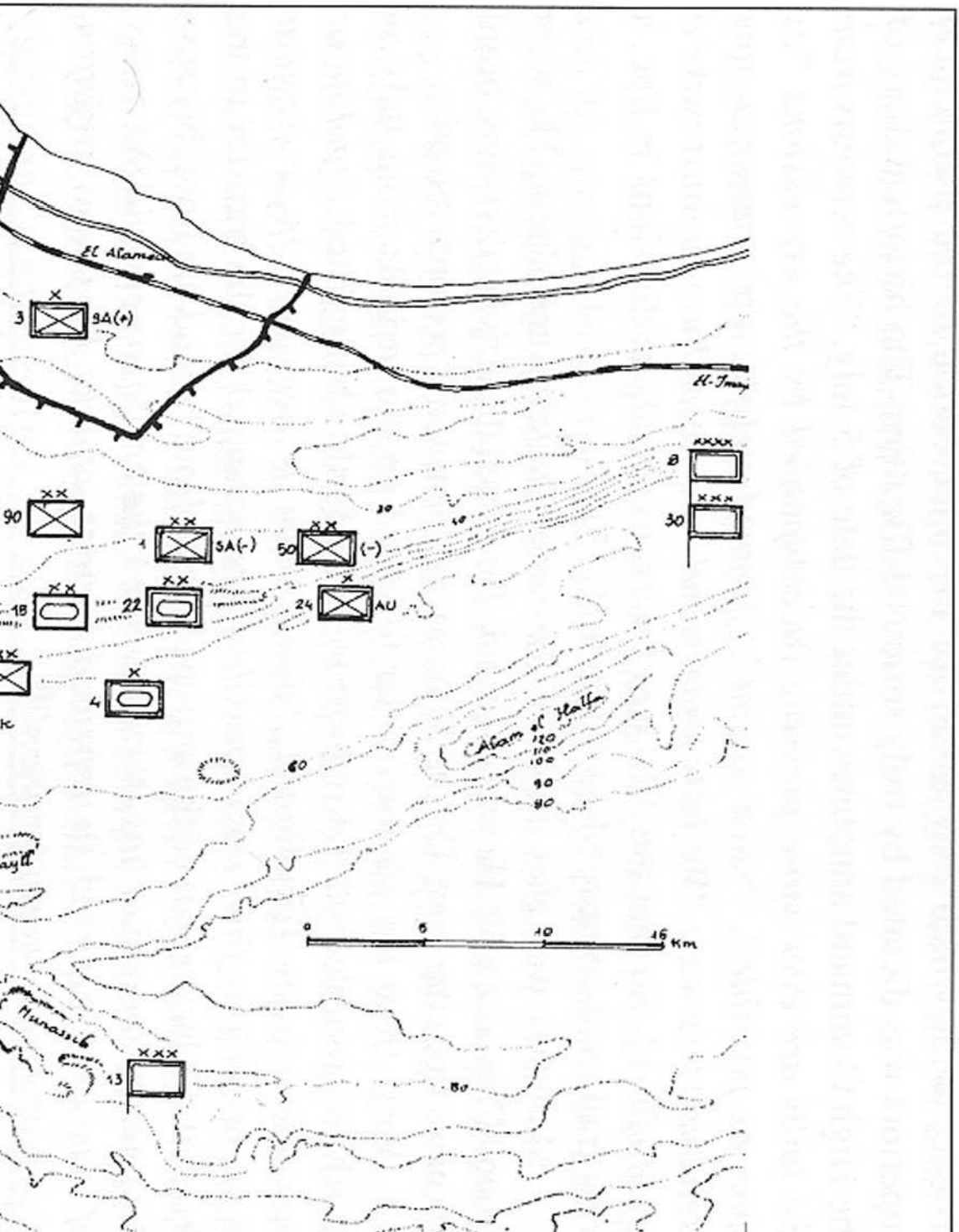

Different local actions had confirmed that the weakened XXI Italian Corps was aligned in front of the western side of the El Alamein *box*. As a consequence, Auchinleck decided to unleash a diversionary attack on Ruweisat with the 9th Australian Division. He concentrated the whole 13th Corps in the Alam Nayil zone in order to use it in a second phase depending on the situation. In the meantime, the left of the British formation would be protected, in hopes that Rommel would accept the *invitation* to move forward in the apparently uncovered direction of the desert towards Cairo (Barrels Track) at the same time, then attack north.

During the night of the 8th, the 24th Australian Brigade (General Godfrey) moved against the 15th *Panzer* on Ruweisat, obtaining some success at first since it was able to destroy some guns and German tractors. Thanks to the divisional reserve's intervention and the *Pavia*'s artillery, calm was restored in the sector[49].

Further south the New Zealanders retreated that same night. Due to the activity carried out on 7 July by the constituted 7th Armoured Division (General J.W. Renton), composed of the 7th Motor Brigade and the 4th Armoured Brigade[50] and also due to the Australian action, the retrograde movement was not noticed at first.

It was already midday when the 21st *Panzer* finally reported to the DAK that the 5th New Zealand Brigade had abandoned positions south of El Mreir and that at 21:50 the Bab El Qattara stronghold seemed to be unmanned. Rommel came to know this news on the 9th in the morning, when he called Nehring for a different reason, and it is easy to imagine

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[49] The entrance of the 24th Australian Brigade in the field has a consequence. On 2 July Auchinleck had ordered that an Australian column be immediately engaged on the El Alamein front. The next day General Morshead, who had well in mind the constraints of engagement imposed by the Australian government, flew to Auchinleck and asked him to revoke the order because the Division, as such, was not ready yet. The meeting, as Morshead remembers it, unfolded like so:

Auchinleck: I want that brigade immediately.

Morshead: You can't have it.

A: Why?

M: Because it has to fight in the framework of its division.

A: Even if I give you an order?

M: Give me the order and we'll see.

Auchinleck then promised that the whole Division would be engaged as a whole as soon as it was ready and Morshead, on his side, consented that the 24th Brigade (not just a column) would temporarily pass to dependence of the 30th Corps. (BARTON MAUGHAN, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, Canberra, 1966, p. 552).

[50] The 4th Armoured Brigade had become "Light" because it was composed of three armoured car regiments.

with what vexation. He immediately arranged for the occupation of the *box* with a tactical group from the 21st *Panzer* and three hours later dropped into the headquarters of the *Afrikakorps*, furious.

It was not simply a question of seizing an opportunity to adequately organise the right of the AIT, but to take advantage of a favourable moment as well. "*In the meantime*", Rommel wrote, "*I had a clear idea of the strength of the El Alamein line and I had discovered its weak point south*"[51]. With this in mind, he was convinced that the adversary left wing was retreating due to the threat created by the push southwards, currently in effect, by the German Scout Groups, the Marcks Group of the 90th Light and the *Littorio,* and that there were no more defensive structures beyond the track to Naqb Abu Dweiss. Thus he concluded that the entire right wing of the AIT turn east making the 21st *Panzer* its hinge.

In the early afternoon of the 9th Rommel joined von Bismarck at Bab el Qattara. Considering it was a stronghold prepared on a very tactically significant position, equipped with concrete pillboxes, protected by minefields and furthermore well-equipped with munitions and reinforcement materials, he was not fully aware of the meaning of the New Zealand retreat. "*Clearing out of this position seemed incomprehensible to us*"[52]. He was euphoric in any case because the OKW, after considering the potential of taking advantage of the success in the African theatre, had asked him which reinforcements he felt he needed, and he had asked for the immediate forwarding of two motorized divisions as a first measure[53].

At 20:00 the marching wing had moved to the alignment of Bab el Qattara-el Taqa, driving back temporary actions of mechanised and motorised elements.

> "It seems possible", Mancinelli telegraphed to the High Command, "that the adversary is on the point of general retreat, perhaps only leav-

[51] ROMMEL E., *op. cit.*, p. 195.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

[53] DSCSAS, telegram 3344 dated 9/7/1942, 12:25 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

Rommel spent that afternoon assessing the situation in the central sector of the front very carefully and inspecting the units in the zone. But he wanted to find the time for a visit of very human significance. At 16:40 Major Leopoldo Pardi, commander of the II/1st *Celere* Artillery, had fallen seriously wounded. In mid-June of 1941 he had particularly distinguished himself in the defence of Halfaya Pass as commander of the I/2nd *Celere*. His was one of the few names known in the sphere of the *Afrikakorps*. When Rommel found out, he flew in his *Cicogna* to the El Daba field hospital where Pardi had been taken in serious condition, and ordered to have him immediately transferred by his plane to a naval hospital present at Marsa Matruh. But Pardi was dying and could not be moved. Rommel held his hand for a long time in silence, before returning to the front.

ing armoured forces. Details are still missing for tomorrow's orders. Tendency is to complete movement started today without leading adversary to rush decisions so that we can still have couple of days available to complete organisation. Otherwise, if adversary takes retreat initiative, AIT will pass immediately to pursuit.
Situation with German units: fuel sufficient up to Cairo, munitions sufficient for any foreseeable fights until this objective is achieved"[54].

Rommel was still seeing rosy.

At nightfall on the 10th the situation with the Italian units was as follows (Sketch N. 14). The XXI Corps kept the El Alamein sector with the *Sabratha* (85th Infantry Regiment - one battalion, 86th Infantry - two battalions and 3rd *Celere* Artillery), the *Trento* (61st and 62nd infantry regiments - three battalions each and 46th Artillery) and the 7th *Bersaglieri* (two battalions). The X Corps kept the Ruweisat sector with the *Pavia* (27th Infantry - one battalion, the 28th Infantry - two battalions, and the 9th *Bersaglieri* - two battalions and the 26th Artillery) and the *Brescia* (19th Infantry - one battalion, and the 1st *Celere* Artillery). The XX Corps was at the rear of the X with the *Trieste* (65th and 66th Infantry Regiments - two battalions, 16 medium inefficient tanks and four armoured cars and the 21st Artillery) at Deir el Shein, the *Ariete* (one *bersaglieri* company, 18 medium inefficient tanks and four armoured cars, two artillery batteries) at Deir el Dhib and then also the *Littorio*, whose command had been assumed by General Becuzzi on 8 July (12th *Bersaglieri* - two battalions, 9 medium tanks and 11 light tanks) southwest of Bab el Qattara. The II/65th Infantry of the *Trieste* was momentarily detached to the Marcks Group at Gebel Kalakh. That formation was still incomplete due to the arrival of new units and substitutions along the line of contact.

The battalions had an average strength of 250 to 450 men, with a significant numeric deficiency in the officer and non-commissioned officer categories, and almost everyone was practically on foot. The morale was good in general, with the exception of the XX Corps. The Deep Well episode had left its mark. As of 4 July, in the army corps's historical diary the morale of the troops was always described as "*rather depressed*" and only started to show signs of improvement towards the end of the month.

It should be added that on 9 July the same diary reported, "*Certain nervousness can be seen in the command, above all due to the lack of men and vehicles in the units*".

[54] DSCSAS, telegram 3352 dated 9/7/1942, 21:50 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

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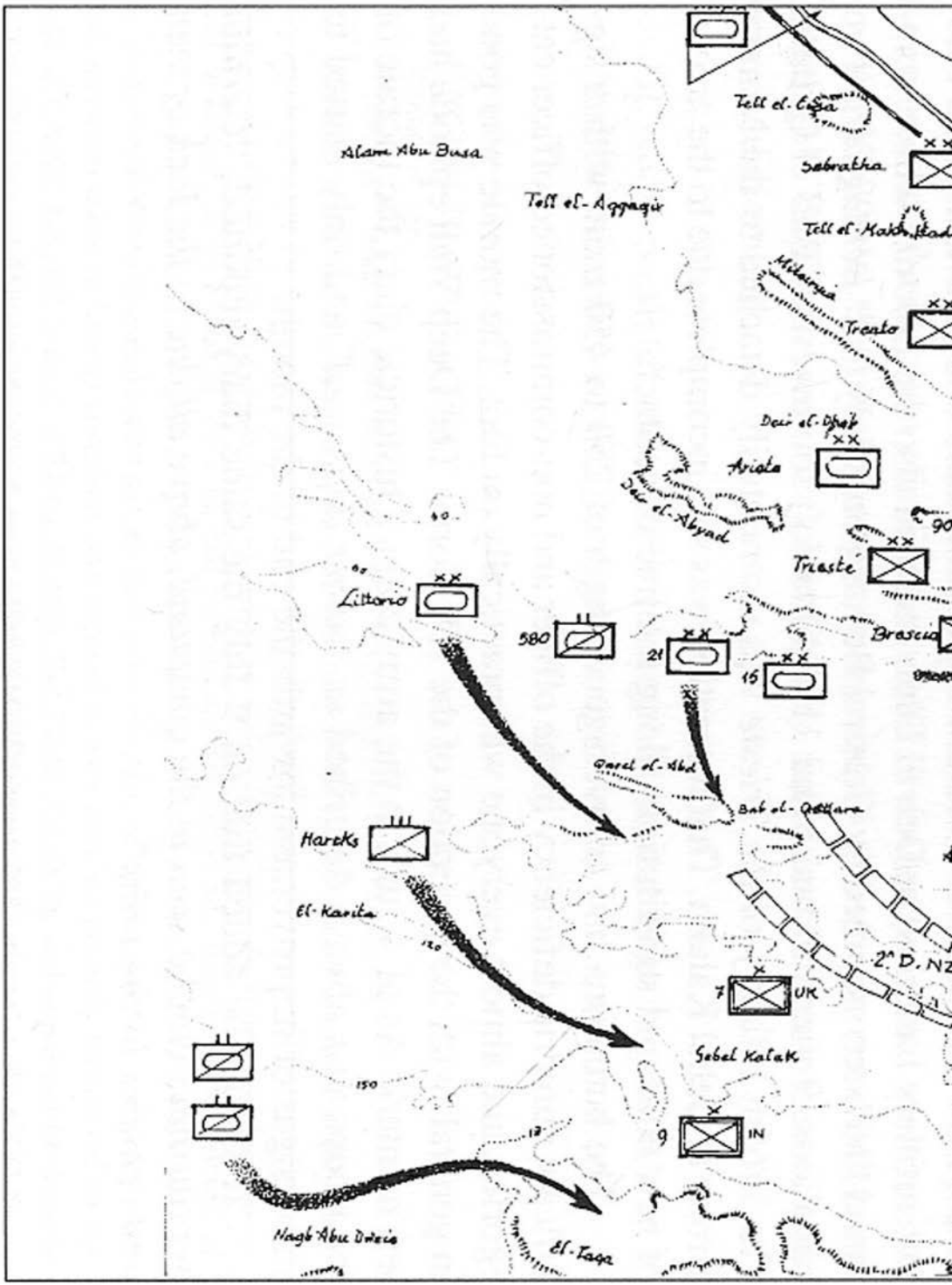

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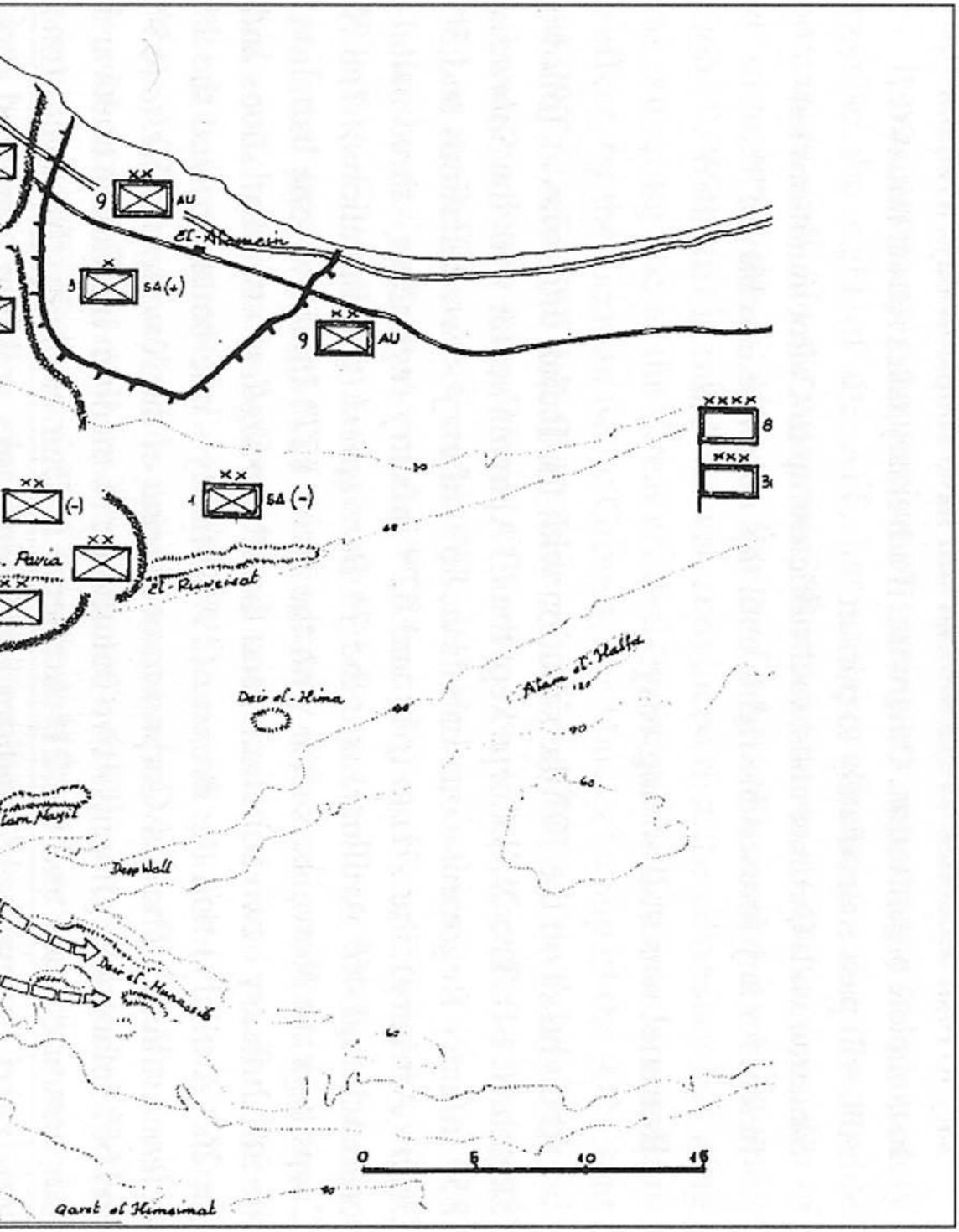

In the meantime, on 8 July Auchinleck had come to know with certainty, through *Enigma* and its interceptions, that the bulk of Rommel's mobile troops were amassing in the central-southern sector.

He immediately ordered Ramsden to study the occupation of the two low-reliefs of Tell el Eisa and of Tell el Makh-Khad (four kilometres southeast of the former) that in some ways controlled the coastal road. He knew the sector was kept by weak Italian formations and that, according to the aerial photos, the defensive works were very hastily constructed. The objective had to constitute the departure base for an attack of columns in the direction of Deir el Shein and for commando raids towards the El Daba landing strip.

The plan made by the 30th Corps Headquarters assigned Tell el Eisa to the 9th Australian Division, reinforced with the 44th *Royal Tanks* equipped with 32 *Valentines,* and Tell el Markh to the 1st South African Division (less the 3rd Brigade) reinforced with eight *Mathildas*. The 13th Corps had to impede Rommel from shifting troops from the southern front in favour of the XXI Italian Corps and stay in a condition to take advantage of any good opportunity.

With this aim, the 2nd Armoured Brigade was assigned to him with the principle task of staying in open view to attract the attention of the AIT.

> "On 10 July at about 5", Rommel remembers, having spent the night at Bab el Qattara, "we were woken by the deafening noise of artillery coming from the northern sector. I immediately had a bad feeling about it"[55].

His feeling was well-founded. At 3:30 the formation of the XXI Corps was overrun by a series of violent artillery concentrations, with the clear character of a preparation. The shooting lasted uninterruptedly for about two hours, although opposed by the counter-battery of two groups of the 8th Army Artillery.

At 6:00, the enemy infantry left departure bases behind extended smoke screens. The Australians had the 26th Brigade on the battalions 2/24, 2/48 and part of the 2/23 as the first wave, followed by the 9th Cavalry Regiment; the 20th Brigade in reserve[56]. The firing support was provided

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[55] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-197.

[56] Although the united engagement of units constituted a fundamental principle, on a practical level there were adjustments. In order to avoid the total destruction of a unit, Morshead decided to leave nucleuses in reserve, on Alexandria's defensive positions. Around those nucleuses, units that had suffered heavy losses could be reconstituted. So the reserve group was initially made up of a battalion for each brigade, and each battalion sent to the front line left behind its deputy commander, six officers and about sixty men of definite rank and specialisation.

by the three divisional artillery regiments and the 7th Medium Calibre Artillery Regiment. Every battalion of the 26th Brigade, over four riflemen companies, was reinforced with machinegun, anti-tank, engineer units and one tank squadron.

The South Africans had planned to engage the 2nd Brigade (with a battalion of the 5th) under the orders of General Palmer. In particular, the battalions had well-differentiated tasks. The *Natal Mounted Rifles* reinforced with eight *Mathildas* had to push to Bir el Maqtua and eventually a bit past[57]. The 2nd *Botha* with ten armoured cars had to be ready to exploit the success whereas the *Cape Town Highlanders* had to guarantee the exit points from the stronghold. The fire support was to be provided by the South African Artillery based at El Alamein.

The Australian attack developed decisively, immediately breaking the line of the *Sabratha,* riding the coast and the railway, isolating the XI *Bersaglieri* Battalion and the II/85th Infantry (in the process of relieving the *bersaglieri*) and smashing the II/86th Infantry. In the rush, the formations of the 1st and IV/3rd *Celere* Artillery were reached and overturned, then the Headquarters of the 7th *Bersaglieri* was captured. Finally, the 149/40 XXXIII Group and the 152/37 LII Group of the 8th Army Artillery were overrun. At 8:00 the objective of Tell Eisa was partially conquered.

The situation of the XXI Corps had suddenly become serious. In the *Sabratha*'s sector a couple of companies of the II/85th Infantry and the III/3rd *Celere* Artillery remained surrounded. The duration of their resistance was a question mark. Further to the left, by the coast, the X/7th *Bersaglieri* was also isolated. In the centre, the XXXII Sapper Battalion was riding the track to Naqb Abu Dweis. The *Trento* was on the right which had not been directly attacked, but kept under pressure by the South African Artillery.

The XXI Corps Command immediately arranged for the X/7th *Bersaglieri* to block the road with the IV/46th Artillery. At the same time, the AIT Headquarters, which was just a few kilometres northeast of Tell el Eisa, had almost immediately seen the *Sabratha* overturned and ran for cover, first obtaining elements from the Headquarters then setting off immediately to block the penetration with a battalion composed of 90th Light and part of the 382nd Infantry of the 164th Division that, luckily, had just arrived. Thanks to the contribution of these units and the intervention

[57] ORPEN NEIL, *South African Forces World War II*, Cape Town-Johannesburg, Purnell, 1971, p. 365. Strangely, the objective was not fixed as Tell el Makh-Khad.

of aviation, Navarini was finally able to contain the Australians 7 kilometres from the breakthrough front and, at about 12:00, the line had come to a certain stillness.

Among the German's recorded losses, one was particularly important: the 621st Company for electronic exploration was destroyed or captured with all of its documents. Its commander, Captain Seebohm, fell prisoner seriously wounded. The value of the interceptions carried out by that special unit was even superior, tactically speaking, to the decoding of the Fellers report. The documents taken by the enemy allowed them to know the activity carried out by the company and, as a consequence, to modify and reorganise all communications procedures.

The South African's attack on the other hand came to nothing because of some initial misdirection, excessive prudence and a precise firing response by the Italians. So the action, started at 5:30, that is to say once the day had already begun, proceeded slowly losing seven out of eight tanks and was stopped without plausible reason shortly after.

Obviously, it was necessary to resolve the questions about the Australian salient in some way. In the morning, Rommel sent for various commanders. The radio communication that reached De Stefanis at 10:30 was alarming: "*The situation is critical. Commander (of the army corps) and division commanders report immediately to the Oberfehlshaber (...)*" But now new troops were flowing in from the central front: the Kiehl Group, which had the II/65th Infantry with a battery from the III/21st Artillery under its tactical control; a mobile column of the 15th *Panzer*; a column of the *Trieste* composed of the Headquarters of the 66th Infantry, the XI Tank Battalion (20 tanks) and a battery of the IV/21st Artillery.

In the afternoon there were no substantial modifications and the artillery activity on both sides was lively, while reinforcements took places around the salient, among which the I/85th Infantry of the *Sabratha*, coming from Bardia, quickly followed by the Headquarters of the *Trieste* and by the whole 21st Artillery. Unfortunately, the attempt at restabilising the *status quo ante* was not successful. At first, it was supposed to be started at 19:30 by the *Sabratha* with the X/7th *Bersaglieri,* the I/85th Infantry and the I/65th Infantry of the *Trieste,* (not yet present) with the task of conquering back the lost strongholds. Then a counterorder arrived at 19:35. Only the X/7th *Bersaglieri* would carry out the counterattack to take back their old positions with the support of the IV/46th Artillery. At 20:30 another correction: the action had been cancelled.

In the meantime, the *Littorio*, still without artillery, was engaged by units of the 4th Armoured Brigade while heading to Deep Well. It managed to disengage with difficulty, losing many light tanks. It received orders to retreat towards Bab el Qattara to better organise itself there at the stronghold with the aid of a 105 battery, a 150 one and a 25-pounder one from war spoils temporarily detached from the 21st *Panzer*.

Considering how the battle was going, Rommel could no longer afford to operate in the southern sector. The danger of a breakthrough to the north required every attention and the movement of mobile forces towards El Alamein cut into the availability of mechanised troops. Therefore, he halted the right with the *Littorio* at Bab el Qattara, the bulk of the 90th Light at Gebel Kalakh and the 3rd and 33rd Scout Groups on the El Taqa plateau, with elements some kilometres forward.

The fighting between 10 and 12 July was notably confused, in part because the relations between the engaged units were very vague and imprecise, in part because of the fragmentation of the action, also in part because of the mixing of tactical groups of different kinds and origins. All of this caused a dissatisfying reconstruction of the events. Thus we shall only cite the main aspects of what was truly perceived as a dramatic moment.

At 4:30 on the 11th the 26th Australian Brigade, reinforced with a squadron of *Valentines* and accompanied by the fire of three Australian field artillery regiments, one South African, and a medium calibre regiment, moved to complete the occupation of the Tell el Eisa position. They were able to barely reach the objective, but the resistance of the Axis divisions, which were continuing to dribble in to fill the containment line, prevented every possibility of widening the success. In this situation, the II/66th Infantry of the *Trieste*, disoriented because it was night and they had lost contact with the German units in which they had been inserted, was surprised and overwhelmed.

At the same time, an extremely heterogeneous Australian mechanised column, called *Daycol*, had begun an incursion at 5:30 in the direction of the Miteiriya ridge. It found and quickly overcame the first obstacle, i.e. a couple of infantry companies; then it continued the effort until it was stopped in the early afternoon by an intense and precise artillery fire. According to the official Australian report, they retreated at 13:30 after having destroyed eight Italian guns and having taken 1,024 prisoners, mostly Italian[58]. If the raid was carried out more or less along the track to Naqb Abu Dweiss, the account cannot be confirmed, since the way to

[58] MAUGHAN B., *op. cit.*, p. 563.

Sanyet el Miteiriya was blocked by the XXXII Sapper Battalion and the III/62nd Infantry of the *Trento*, which had only been engaged in the afternoon. It is very likely, instead, that *Daycol* gathered the fruit from the previous day's manoeuvre, moving northwest not southeast, so it could eliminate the pocket existing there composed of the two companies of the II/85th Infantry, a large part of the XI/7th *Bersaglieri* and the III/3rd *Celere* Artillery.

As mentioned, at about 16:00, the strongholds of the XXXII Sapper Battalion and the III/62nd Infantry were attacked. This time the action was South African. In the morning, General Ramsden did not hesitate to compare the good results of the Australians with the meagre results of the South Africans, and suggested the intervention of one or two brigades southwards. Pienaar, after asking for and obtaining 16 *Valentines*, in addition to the eight *Mathildas* already received, delineated a rather muddled plan. A column of the 2nd Brigade - the *Matie* column - under the orders of Brigadier du Toit had to attack the Miteiriya ridge, establish a support point there, then head northeast of El Wishka and take the utmost advantage of the initiative's effects. At the same time, a tactical group from the 1st Brigade, based on the *Royal Natal Carbineers*, had to act in the Alam el Onsol sector. The hasty preparation of the columns brought about complications and a delay of an hour with respect to the plan. However at 16:30 the attack got underway. If the organisation was rather poor, the execution was even worse and was halted by a barrage by the 46th Artillery of the *Trento*. At this point Brigadier du Toit declared "*that the entire operation had become a farce*" and cut it short, retreating his men[59]. As for the Carbineers, they too concluded very little and soon retraced their steps.

Overall the situation in the XXI Corps' sector remained serious, also because it was thought to be an effort made by the 8th Army with a resolutive purpose that would be rapidly boosted by the reinforcements that - it was heard - would arrive in Egypt. On the basis of these considerations, Rommel ordered to move the entire *Trieste* to the left of the *Trento*, the *Littorio* to southeast of El Mreir and the 21st *Panzer* to Deir el Shein.

The total Italian losses on the 10th and 11th in the northern sector amounted to the following:

Sabratha Infantry Division: two battalions (700 men), three artillery groups (550 men and 25 guns)

Trieste Infantry Division: one battalion (250 men)

[59] ORPEN N., *op. cit.*, p. 368.

Corps support units: 7th *Bersaglieri* Headquarters and two companies, (350 men) III/24th Artillery (20 men and 5 guns)

It is now necessary to speak explicitly about the events that had overturned some units, all the more because such incidents repeated themselves shortly after. We are obviously dealing with unpleasant incidents, which were aggravated by negative and well-known shortages related to the organization of the units, training, and psychological matters. It is unpleasant to write about them, but it would not be fair to ignore them. Rather than commenting on them, however, it is better to report what was telegraphed at the time from Mancinelli to the High Command:

> "(...) To follow up on what happened at *Sabratha*", he communicated on the 11th, "and this morning in one of the *Trieste* battalions, Marshal Rommel invited commanders of army corps to severely apply Italian military laws as example punishment of guilt and responsibility. As a matter of fact, while the serious crisis of the army is due to some shortcomings, no measure appears to have been taken and rather there is strong tendency to piteously cover up the truth for love of homeland. This goal was not attained because the truth is noted by everybody and, if ever altered in meaning, it would be in unfavourable way for us.
> The events that occurred are evidently produced by complex factors. Among these, undoubtedly, the fatigue factor. However, any apprehensiveness among infantry organised in defence facing the approach of few tanks appears unjustifiable, the same for hypersensitivity towards being surrounded while in strongholds, and the tendency for units not immediately engaged to move backwards transforming into retreat what would be an unfavourable local incident. Moreover, note has been taken of the phenomenon of disbanded soldiers constantly lacking individual arms and not immediately recovering them, often accompanied by their officers that passively follow the mass.
> Yesterday, XXI Corps Headquarters bravely committed itself to stabilising the situation. Also take note of the courageous behaviour of the 99th battery with 149/40 guns that contributed much to stopping the enemy"[60].

[60] DSCSAS, telegram 3365 dated 11/7/1942, 21:30 hours by Col. Mancinelli. The 99th Battery of the XXXIII Group from the 149/40 was left with about 400 shots at maximum charge. Seeing the enemy very close at that point, the battery commander ordered to open fire with zero elevation. In front of the very heavy 149, with long horizontal barrels, a terrifying hell burst that swallowed up earth, Australians and vehicles, so that the rapid firing on the line was such as to create a tremendous atmosphere. When, after the last shot, only the dead remained in front of the battery, the first units of the 382nd German Infantry began to arrive in the rear.

Bastico answered immediately, feeling that an exemplary intervention was in order to charge those responsible, once the verifications underway had been completed. However, in the investigation into the explanations of what happened, an "*extremely feeble attention to maintaining organic ties, as I must ascertain from the description of the situation that you sent me*", became evident and he entrusted Mancinelli to "*recall the attention of the AIT Headquarters to dealing with the principles that have very high material value for us and that have been pursued for years*"[61]. This would have been much better illustrated in a direct meeting with Rommel.

On the 12th, Mancinelli continued on the subject:

"(...) Causes indicated certainly contribute to determining the crisis of units' resistance. Situation, on the other hand, is such as to require immediate engagement of every Italian and German unit. This situation will certainly continue, independently of whether the operations will lead us to victorious developments, or to the maintenance of achieved positions. All the same I do not believe that Marshal Rommel has alternatives in troop employment.

However it can be observed that the common fatigue factor is felt differently in the different units revealing different merit in respect to the commanders. I allow myself to express this judgement keeping with the conditional authorisation in your radio message last time.

Marshal Rommel sent the following confidential order to Army Corps Headquarters. Begins. The number of cases is multiplying in which soldiers cowardly abandon the battlefield without fighting. I expect the A.C. Commanders to intervene immediately with more severe lessons, according to the Italian military penal code, to overcome this serious crisis. It is not befitting to withdraw in front of the death penalty. Ends.

The severe warning of the foreign commander could perhaps be made less biting and at the same time more effective through direct contact of the High Command with headquarters and troops at the line.

As they are lacking shifts for leave, it might be necessary to have tangible signs of recognition for the effort arriving in the form of general comforts, (wine!) cash awards, grant some immediate leave, some awards distributed to the officers and troops in the field"[62].

[61] DSCSAS, telegram 01/12885 dated 12/7/1942, 12:45 hours.

[62] DSCSAS, telegram 3374 dated 12/7/1942, 19:00 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

As much as it was expressed with tact, the bad impression generated by the physical distance of the high commander was very evident. That the High Command worried about the army was a given, but the sensation among the troops - erred, but still existing - of little interest, little diligence in the resolution of problems by the highest Italian authorities in Northern Africa was just as undeniable. The next day Barbasetti replied to this observation, specifying to Mancinelli, *"for your knowledge"*, that the High Command assured direct permanent contact with the large units at the line through liaison officers from the operations office, information, propaganda; that the propaganda office would lend every possible moral and material assistance and that the commanders of major formations were authorised to give leave as award as much as they deemed deserving in the field. A discussion about this would take us rather off track. Let's limit ourselves to saying, unfortunately without a belying theme, that moral action, material and moral assistance and the management of personnel in general was carried out with much good will but generally "by ear" and that a comparison with the Anglo-Saxon armies (obviously, apart from the economic possibilities) would not at all be to our advantage.

Regarding the flow of reinforcements to the AIT, it is necessary to recognise the powerful effort carried out by the High Command to send 18 battalions in all, two of which were reserves and three were newly-formed; 70 medium tanks, 12 artillery 75/18 self-propelled howitzers and three armoured cars with their relative crews; three artillery groups and lots of heavy weapons.

Moreover, it is doubtless that between the front line and Tobruk, and especially in the divisional and corps bases, there were many groups or isolated elements without precise orders to move forward or stay at rest; the same for the recovery of heavy arms and tanks that did not occur with the necessary promptness.

And we can also observe that inserting new battalions in the frontline was not always a wise measure, given the conditions in which they were thrown into action, since they did not always follow the *indispensable* training and amalgamation phase after their constitution. The *Sabratha* division could be an example to avoid. Brought back to life after its destruction in 1941, it had largely drawn from personnel that could be found behind the lines, thus receiving many randomly collected servicemen who were tired and demoralised from living too long in the colonies, barely trained and with serious deficiencies in organisation, cohesion and presence of good officers. Even if some units, like the I/85th Infantry, behaved well, the scant cohesion of the division (furthermore very incom-

plete) is no wonder, especially given the circumstances. On the other hand, there were units in the British side that disbanded after a short fight as well, due to a lack of training and cohesion.

On 12 July at 17:00, there was an attempt to restore the line as it was on the day of the 9th. From northwest, the X/7th *Bersaglieri* had to advance along the coastal road between the carriageway and the sea, the 382nd German Infantry to the centre and the I/85th Infantry to the right. In the meantime, the *Trento* would open corridors in its own minefields to allow the 21st *Panzer* through, which would attack El Alamein on the following day.

The progression started on time, but was carried out slowly due to the resistance put up by the 26th Australian Brigade, and at dusk it stopped with a gain of about 800 metres. The main obstacles were met by the 382nd German Infantry, whose left battalion lost its commander and all its company commanders but one, and its force was reduced to a little more than a company. Hill 23 of Tell Eisa was occupied by the I/85th Infantry, but Hill 25 remained in enemy hands (Sketch N. 15). As a compensation, the I/86th Infantry arrived in the evening.

While the intelligence service of the 8th Army spotted an intense traffic on the coastal road in the direction of the border - such as it would lead one to think of the symptoms of an AIT retreat - Rommel had established an attack by the 21st *Panzer* against the El Alamein *box*. If all had gone well, he would have eliminated the stronghold, resolving the huge problem of the disruption of the British line; if it had gone badly, he would have cut off, he thought, the Australian salient. Put this way, the plan would have been considered acceptable, but it is enough to reflect on the state in which the *Panzerdivisionen* were, even if beefed up by reserves, to realize the excessive ambition of the design. It has already been seen, and it will be seen again, that the violence of the artillery's barrage was becoming a major obstacle. As if that had not been enough, Auchinleck came to know about the movement in progress of the 21st *Panzer* from the interceptions service.

The attack began on the 13th at noon, preceded by bombing by *Stukas* and Ju.88 and by a preparation carried out by the available Italo-German artillery, while northwest the 382nd German Infantry and the I/85th Infantry from the *Sabratha* engaged the 26th Australian Brigade. Unfortunately, the 104th Infantry of the 21st *Panzer* was deployed too early and therefore was not in a position to take immediate advantage of the effect of the air bombing.

Despite the reiteration of the air raids and the intervention of the 5th *Panzerregiment,* the 104th Regiment asked to retreat at 17:30 unable to suffer further Australian and South African halting fire, and shortly after the

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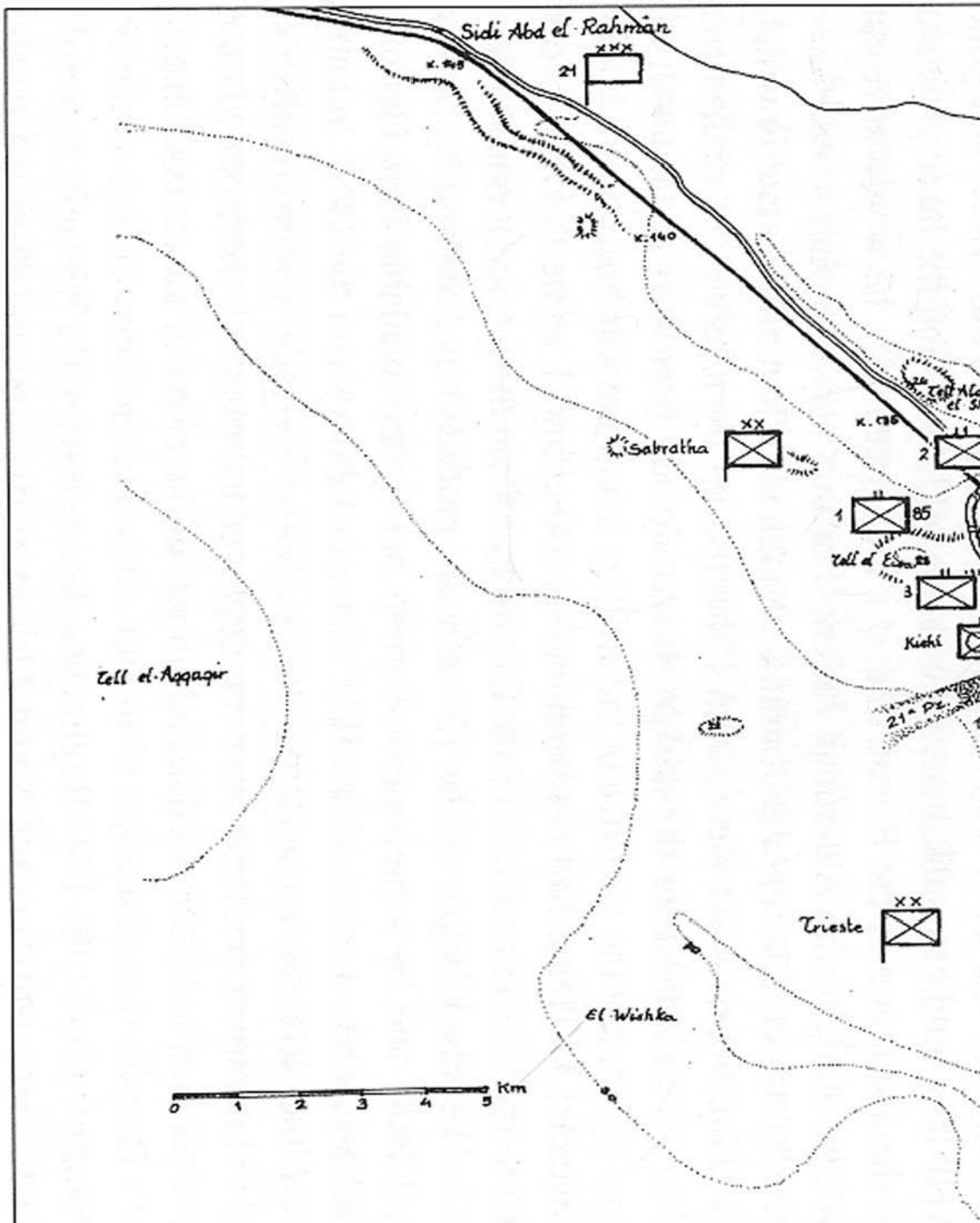

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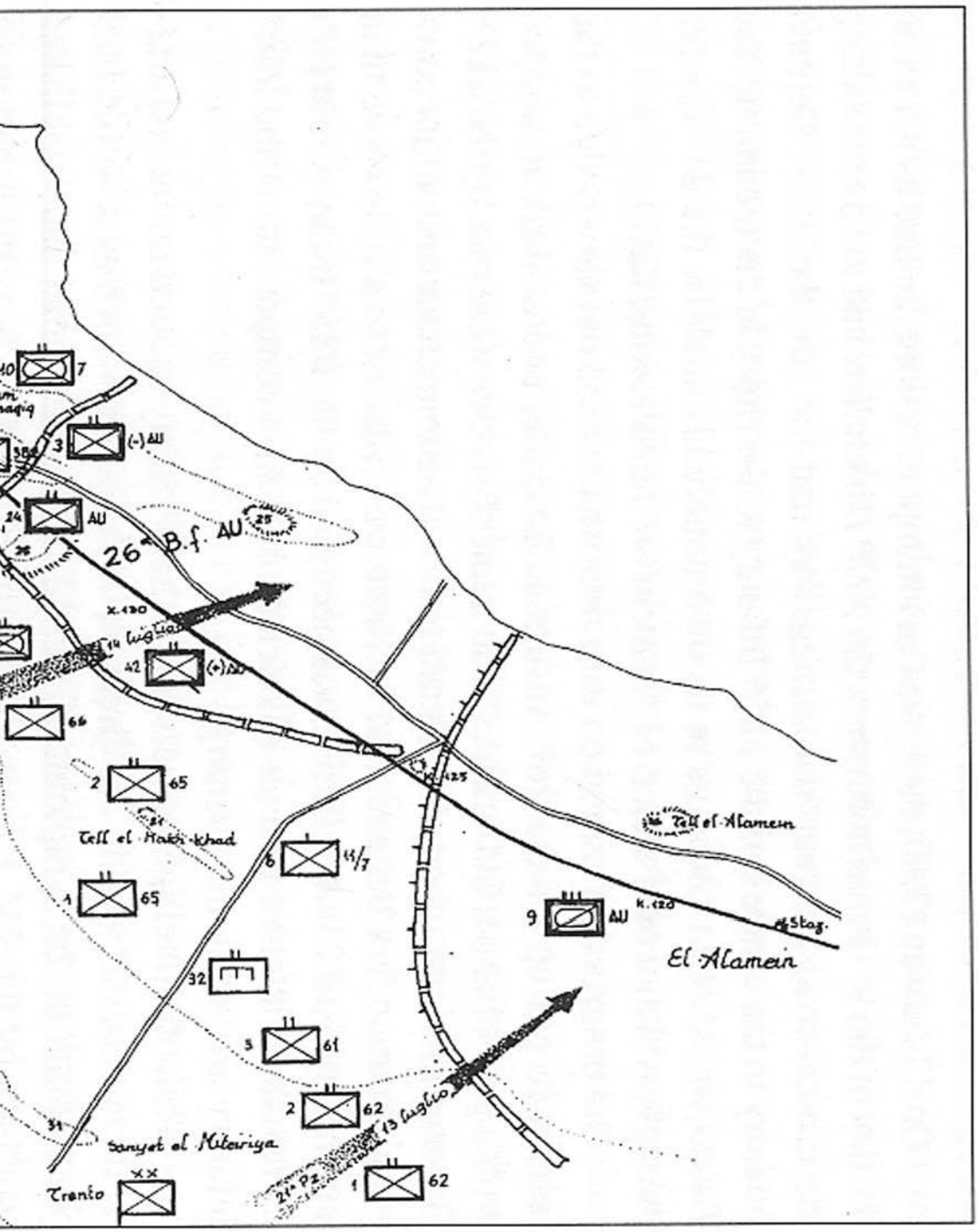


5th Armour also indicated being unable to break through to gain some advantage. Rommel ordered the 21st *Panzer* to retreat to Deir el Shein, planning to renew the operation from there the following day.

Therefore, the attack was repeated in the afternoon of the 14th. But this time the direction of the 21st *Panzer* had moved to the left of the *Trieste*, with the limited aim of cutting the base of the Australian salient.

The *Sabratha* (with the X/7th *Bersaglieri*, the I/85th Infantry and the newly-arrived I/86th Infantry) and the 382nd German Infantry had to regulate their pressure according to the progression gradually developed by the 21st. The results of the new attempt were decisively modest, despite the large, profuse commitment. However, the I/85th took back the guns from a 149/28 battery that had been lost on the 10th.

In the southern sector the front was pushed ten-fifteen kilometres eastwards. Beginning at Ruweisat, the Baade group was operating from the 164th German Division; then the XX Corps with a tactical group from the *Ariete* and one from the *Littorio*; further south the *Menton* group from the 90th Light and the 3rd Reconnaissance Group. At about 19:00 the advance, which had not encountered much opposition, was brought to an end.

3. The First Battle at Ruweisat (15-17 July)

According to the intelligence service of the High Command, the British forces in Egypt were divided into two blocks. 25 battalions, 256 artillery guns and 170 tanks were supposed to be at El Alamein; 23 battalions, 96 guns and no tanks were thought to be detached to the Amiriya-*uadi* Natrun-El Fayum line.

Apart from the minor convoys whose value would not modify the extent of the current troops by much, these numbers did not seem susceptible to be significantly increased until the end of August, when the huge reinforcements on their way from the United States and Great Britain were predicted to arrive.

Mussolini's stay in Libya, in an operational environment that alternated between flashes of hope and reasons for doubt, had started to weigh on him. He would like to have known exactly what Rommel's point of view was and his intentions for the immediate future and the retaking of the offensive, though he did not want to go to the AIT Headquarters:

> "Above all, it is important to know", Barbasetti wrote to Mancinelli on 13 July, "how long the Field Marshal thinks it is still necessary to wait

before re-establishing the flow of units and artillery, which I highlighted in reorganising and flow of reserves, and to reorganise services before launching a new attack intended to take up the advance to the Nile again"[63].

This was also because materials were supposed to arrive for the reactivation of the Capuzzo-Alexandria railroad, barges for the coastal traffic, Italian and German tanks, paratrooper battalions and eventually another division.

The next day Mancinelli went to Rommel and put on the table all the questions asked by the High Command. The Marshal expressed his thoughts without circomlocutions. It was not possible to indicate, even approximately, when to take up the offensive again, given that this was subordinate to the completion of the Italo-German divisions and to the possible arrival of other large units. Two-three weeks was the time needed on the German side; an indicative timeframe for the Italian divisions could be useful. In the meantime, he intended to assure the firm possession of the El Alamein gap with the least wide outline, by trying to impose his initiative on the enemy every day with tactical actions limited in space and time. In this regard, he maintained that the attack on the 13th, although unsuccessful, had induced Auchinleck to transfer the main bulk of his forces to the northern sector, arranging them for a deep defence. He considered the action of that same day as "*decisive*" tending to align the right wing of the army to the Ruweisat position. Furthermore, with the other operation planned for the north that evening, he aimed not only to better the local situation, but also to generate uncertainty in the enemy about the real intentions of the AIT north and south.

In any case, Rommel did not think "*it is possible to proceed with the offensive before the total completion of the army, unless particular circumstances force us to accelerate the times*". The intelligence reports the AIT had, even if predicting little resistance on the El Alamein front, led one to consider that a new battle for Cairo was more than possible. This led to the necessity of a fully efficient army, with absolutely precise logistic support.

In such a vision and when circumstances had rendered advancing possible again, he would only have proceeded with the mobile units of the army, leaving the infantry divisions to garrison the momentary positions as a precaution. Of course, once Cairo had been conquered, the infantry

[63] DSCSAS, telegram 01/12989, Op. dated 13/7/1942, 23:00 hours.

would join the armoured and motorized divisions as soon as possible. Meanwhile, it was necessary to reinforce their positions with *very substantial* recourse to minefields (the 50,000 mines promised were not enough) and barbed-wired obstacles. In conclusion, "*synthesizing his impressions, Marshal Rommel considers the current situation fundamentally favourable though difficult*", Mancinelli communicated. He, on completion of this report, touched on an important point. He had reached the conclusion that Rommel did not foresee, at least for the time being, using the paratrooper battalions being sent as airborne units at all, but rather simply as an elite infantry. In consequence, it made much more sense to assign an equal number of excellent infantry battalions to the AIT and keep the paratroopers as a reserve for the High Command[64].

It is worth noting that Rommel's optimism was not based on a very precise reconstruction of the organisation of the 8th Army, at least judging by the AIT Headquarters's news report on 14 July. The 10th Army Corps was thought to be in the northern sector with the 9th Australian Division (which seemed to have replaced the 2nd South African) and the 5th Indian Division. The 13th Corps with the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions were spotted in the centre and south. No indications resulted about the position of the 2nd New Zealand Division, which was known to have retreated from the line. The general attitude was considered defensive.

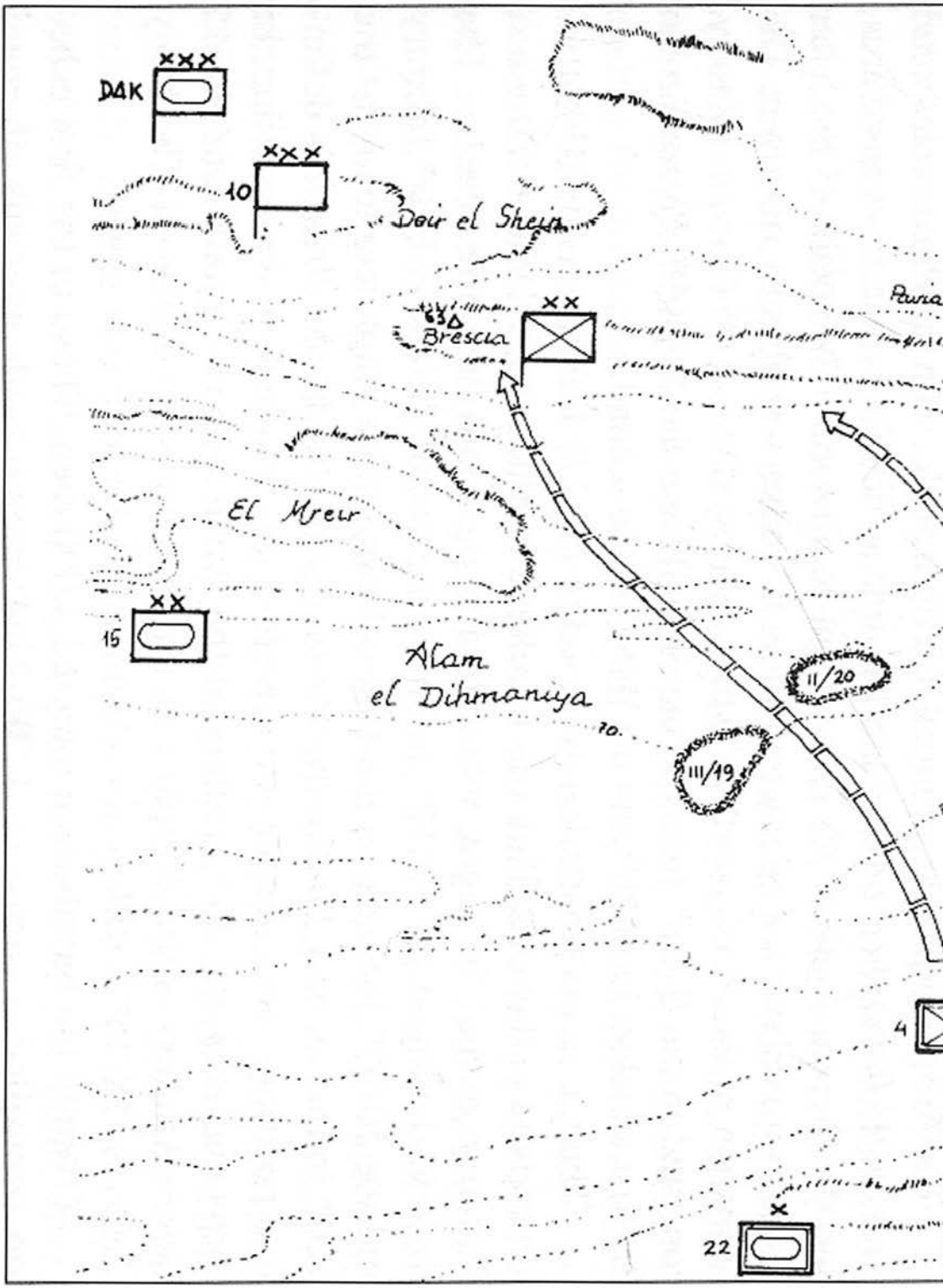
Not wanting to give too much weight to statements that could not be exempt from propagandistic tones, the 14th in the morning Rommel declared to a group of Italian journalists at el Daba that, though dealing with a hard struggle, he was calm because he was sure he would resolve it in a few days; that the doors to Egypt were already in Axis hands and that he had no intention of letting them be taken away; that the enemy had huge problems such as India, Caucasus, and the battle for the Atlantic. And then, considering that before it could rally enough of its "*Halbaffen*" (literally: half monkeys) on the Egyptian front, the enemy would be forced to travel halfway around the world to replenish the Middle East, there was time to achieve a success, and of this he was certain ("*davon bin ich ganz sicher*"). In conclusion:

> "The solution", he said, "could come from one moment to the next, just as it can arrive after a certain waiting period; this, I repeat, does not mean anything: because we are here, we will stay and we have the keys to Egypt firmly in hand. I am absolutely certain of victory. This is all I can tell you"[65].

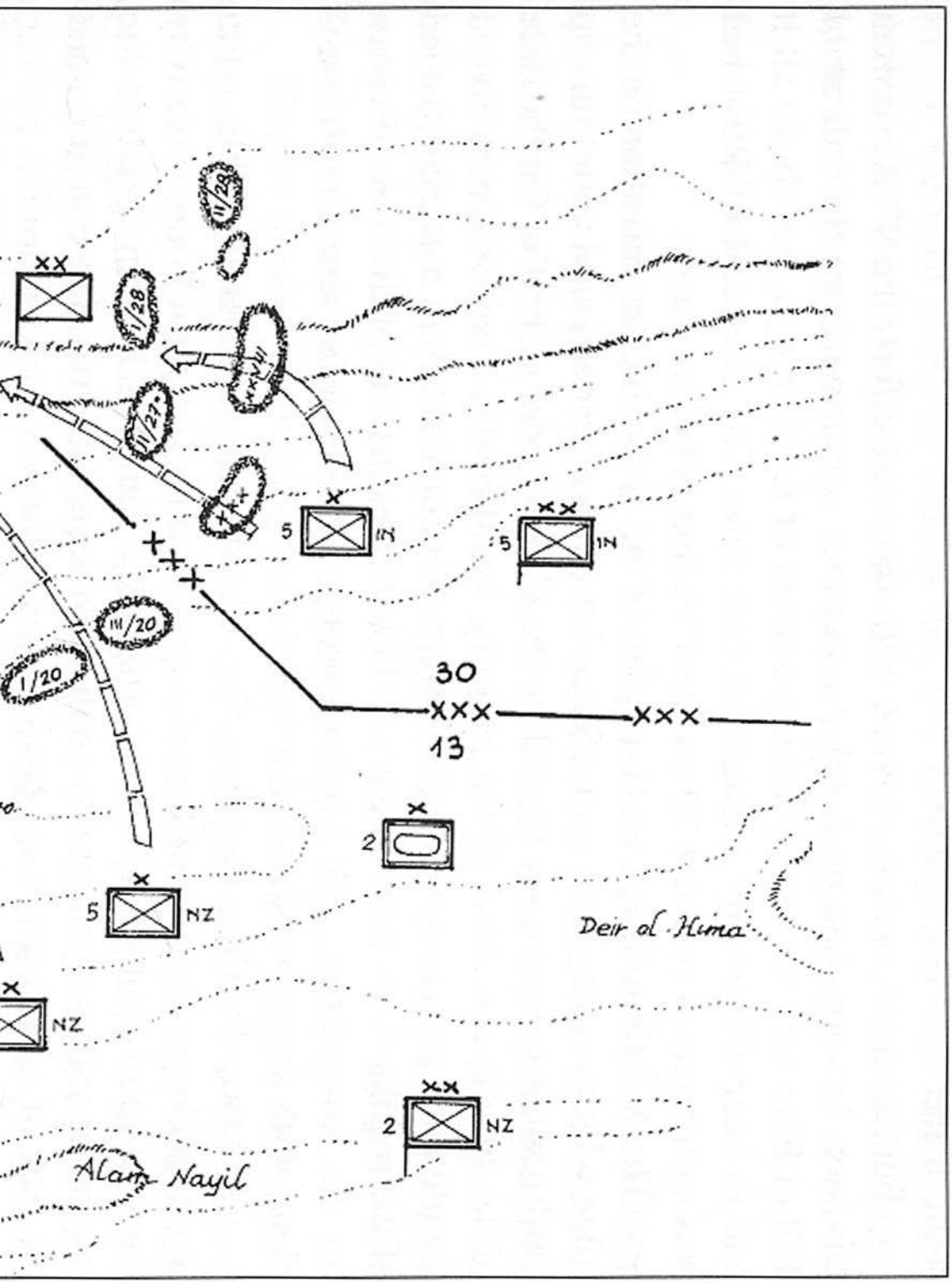
[64] DSCSAS, telegram 3393 dated 14/7/1942, 18:15 hours by Col. Mancinelli.
[65] Note dated 16/7/1942 from CSFAAS - Office of Military Intelligence.

Sketch

"THE FIRST BATTLE AT



N. 16
RUWEISAT (15-17 JULY)"



There was more than one difficulty on the British side, also in relation to the fear of seeing the Germans turn towards Caucasus or Turkey. On 12 July Churchill wrote Auchinleck expressing the material impossibility of sending him other troops, besides those already *en route* or planned for August, by the end of October. The worries about a German irruption in the Middle East from the Russian theatre of operations could only be resolved by defeating Rommel or at least forcing him to retreat to a "safe distance" from the Delta. Defeating Rommel was becoming imperative.

In this climate, and more precisely on 13 July, when interceptions revealed the presence of the 21st *Panzer* at the far edge of the northern El Alamein front, the problem of Ruweisat ripened. An hour after learning of this particular, Auchinleck telegraphed Brooke:

> "The German troops now seem extremely dispersed, with the 21st *Panzerdivision* north, the 15th in the centre and the 90th Light Division south. So I am about to seize the favourable opportunity to hit hard at the centre against the Italians. My intention is to hit the Italians wherever possible, given their low morale and because the Germans cannot maintain extended fronts without them"[66].

Having lightened the Italo-German pressure south of Deir el Shein and persisting the threat in the El Alamein sector to keep Rommel from recovering mobile troops, Auchinleck thought the moment right for "*breaking the central sector of the adversary and destroying his forces east of the el Alamein-Abu Dweiss Track and north of the Ruweisat ridge*"[67].

The operation was split between the two corps, with a general south-east-northwest direction while the main effort was to the left, seeing how it dealt mainly with occupying Hill 63 on the western part of Ruweisat (Sketch N. 16). There is no indication that a coordination plan was made at army level, except for the artillery fire. The Italo-German units deployment was known in an incomplete way, though considered to be of little amount.

General Gott assigned the conquest of Hill 63 to the 2nd New Zealand Division Infantry and the protection of the New Zealand's left to the 1st Armoured Division. This division was also tasked with the exploitation of the success northwards, from dawn on, should the opportunity present itself.

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[66] HINSLEY F.H., *op. cit.*

[67] PLAYFAIR I.S.O., *op. cit.*, p. 347.

General Ramsden entrusted the 5th Indian Brigade Infantry with completing the occupation of the central part of Ruweisat and supporting the right of the New Zealanders.

Furthermore, in concordance with the cited effort, the 9th Australian Division Infantry had to develop a distinct operation from the salient of Tell el Eisa with the aim of taking control of El Miteiriya, but above all it had to keep the enemy engaged in that zone. The conquest of Ruweisat was estimated to end at 4:30 on the 15th, that is before dawn.

The X Italian Corps was completing the defensive organization on the ridge with the oncoming units. Since little has ever been said about this up until now, it is necessary to outline the Corps' order of battle. On the date of 14 July it consisted of ten infantry battalions instead of the twelve it should have had, two *bersaglieri*, eight divisional artillery batteries instead of the regular fifteen, two heavy field batteries instead of the nine foreseen for the Army Corps 16th Artillery group. The services were almost complete, with the exception of the vehicles.

The two divisions each had five-six efficient vehicles available, quite worn and kept working with continuous repairs. The great hopes woken by the war spoils vehicles had unfortunately vanished by then because the imperfect ability to put and keep them in acceptable running condition and the lack of spare parts had caused most of them to be abandoned.

The Army Corps was arranged in a right angle, with the *Pavia*, reinforced with the 9th *Bersaglieri* on the meridian side astride Ruweisat, front eastwards, and the *Brescia* south of the ridge, front southwards. The sector of the latter division was about ten kilometres wide, the other was slightly narrower. The formation of the *Pavia,* north of which there was the 200th German Infantry, consisted in the II /28th Infantry, the XXVIII and the XXX/9th *Bersaglieri* in the first echelon; the I/28th and the II/27th in the second.

Then, a reserve battalion assigned to the 27th Infantry as its III battalion arrived in the area. This was to relieve in place the XXVIII *Bersaglieri* Battalion during the night, which had to pass into the corps reserve. The *Brescia* deployed the III/19th Infantry, the II/20th Infantry, I/20th Infantry and the III/20th Infantry in the first echelon and a single company of the I/20th in the second. Unlike the *Pavia*'s strongholds, the *Brescia*'s defensive positions were deeper and therefore less manned on the frontline. In corps rear area, the 26th Artillery of the *Pavia* with two groups and the 1st *Celere* Artillery of the *Brescia* with three groups were deployed. The Army Corps XLIX/16th Artillery was deployed in the central position.

Overall, the battalions numbered 4,000 men. Those in the first echelon controlled a sector of 1,500-2,000 metres with intervals of equal

dimensions. The laying of 9,000 anti-tank mines was underway in front of the line and especially along the gap between the two divisions. Since a unit of German pioneers was in the area to cooperate, the tasks were shared. The Italian engineers only laid the boundaries of the minefields, while the Germans hastily dealt with laying the mines inside.

The 15th of July

The evening of the 14th at 23:00 the two New Zealand brigades in first echelon left the departure bases and arrived nearby the forward elements of the *Brescia* almost unnoticed, as the Italians were laying the barbed-wired obstacles and outlining the minefields. The surprise undoubtedly existed, at least partially, and was facilitated by the night ambient and probably by having discovered foxholes during the day in the New Zealand positions believed to be a symptom of a static attitude.

Enemy artillery and firing bases suddenly opened fire just after midnight. Flares created visibility while bursts of tracers showed the directions of attack. To tell the truth the assault was neither rapid nor systematic, which does not mean it was not effective. The scant study of the Italian emplacements and the existence of large very badly controlled corridors resulted into non-intentional tactics of infiltration, which were, however, rich in tangible results.

The very first news by telephone reached the X Corps Headquarters and gave Gioda an immediate feeling of what was happening. All of the first, and only, line of the *Brescia* was overcome at more than one point. Subsequent communications informed that the strongholds were overrun from more than one direction and the first enemy elements were already heading for divisional artillery. After that, every radio and telephone contact with the *Brescia* was interrupted definitively. The situation quickly got worse. The strongholds of the 20th Infantry continued to fight, even if isolated and without the support of artillery, which had been overwhelmed at that point, and the III/19th got smashed. It was a recruit battalion, that had arrived just that day and had been inserted in the regiment as III Battalion, with little training and commanded and organised by reserve officers. General Lombardi criticised such an assignment since, at Tobruk and Bardia, there was the entire 19th Infantry that he had persistently asked for.

Lombardi watched the unfolding of events without having a unit available to react with. Actually, he could have had one: the XXVIII *Bersaglieri* Battalion, which had to pull back towards Deir el Shein, after being substituted by the III/27th Infantry. But it was overwhelmed in the

chaotic battle and those who were left gathered a bit further north, but were unusable as a manoeuvre element. As if this were not enough, this same Division's Headquarters was surrounded and captured. By that time the *Brescia* front was broken through and the enemy penetrated for some kilometres, moreover finding itself to the back of the *Pavia*. Before dawn, in a tactical situation of remarkable confusion, General Kippenberger's 5th New Zealand Brigade had reached the central part of Ruweisat and General Burrow's 4th Hill 63, after which he started to sieve the battlefield for strongholds that were still standing (most of them were).

In the meantime, the *Pavia* was faced by the 5th Indian Brigade (Brigadier Russel). Just after midnight, the X Corps Headquarters became aware that the *Brescia* was under strong pressure and solicited the substitution of the XXVII/9th *Bersaglieri* with the III/27th Infantry which proceeded rather slowly. At about half past midnight, the whole southern sector of the division was suddenly attacked. The *Pavia*, however, had a largely satisfying installation at hand thanks to the structures positioned on the right (XXX/9th *Bersaglieri*, II and III/27th Infantry). These structures were also in contact with the *Brescia* and, when they were subsequently assailed from east, south and west, they were able to withstand the enemy thrust for some time. At dawn the division was still resisting, with the sector of the 28th Infantry still complete. The II/27th was surrounded, but still efficient. The III/27th had been reduced to a couple of companies as it had been seized just when deploying with the munitions and a portion of the heavy weapons still on the trucks. One of its groups disbanded. The XXX//9th *Bersaglieri*, on the other hand, had been overcome.

From what appears in British sources, although the operation was being carried out with overall results, disorder ruled among the New Zealand and Indian lines.

The 4th New Zealand Brigade was partially scattered. The internal communications did not work. The objective had been reached, but many active Italian strongholds remained in the first echelon behind the battalions' backs. The 5th Brigade had also conquered their objective with the battalion advanced to the right, but the one on the left was completely scattered and almost all the anti-tank guns remained behind. Furthermore, they suffered the same lack of communications that the 4th Brigade had. Finally, the 6th constituted the reserve and southwest of it was all the divisional artillery, with some range problems.

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[68] The 2nd Armoured Brigade was made up of: 6th *Royal Tanks*, III/5th *Royal Tanks* and the 9th Lancers. It counted on 46 *Grants*, 11 *Stuarts* and 59 *Crusaders*.

As for the two brigades from the 1st Armoured Division, thought to be in movement already, they were still standing awaiting orders, the 2nd west of Deir Hima and the 22nd at Alam Nayil[69].

The AIT Headquarters was trying to find its way. The first to grow alarmed was Nehring. Originally, the Army Headquarters had predicted further developments in the action in the southern sector, starting at 5:30. The main objective was Deep Well. The *Menton* Group from Bab el Qattara and the *Baade* Group (115th Infantry on two battalions and a group of artillery) were to converge up to it simultaneously from the area north of Gebel Kalakh. The XX Corps was between them: the *Littorio,* with the task of participating in the *Menton* Group's advance, and the *Ariete,* with that of protecting the *Menton's* left and being ready, once Deep Well was occupied, to move north-eastwards or northwards, in connection with the *Baade* Group on the right and a column of the 15th *Panzer* on the left, to establish contact with the X corps.

The overall action would be supported by the 15th *Panzer*'s artillery and the X Corps aligned on Ruweisat. Further south, the Briel Group and a unit of the 90th Light were acting, now temporarily commanded by Colonel Lungerhausen, in place of General Kleeman who was sick.

The unexpected New Zealand attack obviously forced a change in plan and, at 6:00, De Stefanis received orders from Nehring, who had been charged by Rommel with "*clearing enemy infiltration*" and halting the movement of the *Ariete* and the *Littorio*. The two divisions or, better, the tactical groups organised from them, had only to push scouting elements eastwards and, if faced with a prevailing enemy pressure, immediately pull back towards Bab el Qattara.

So, given the circumstances, Nehring started to engage the 15th *Panzer* in the central sector, now commanded by General von Randow, substituting von Vaerst who had been wounded. But meanwhile, a favourable episode was recorded north of Alam el Dihmaniya just at the break of dawn. A company of the 5th *Panzerregiment*, with about ten tanks, suddenly came up to the rear of the II/22nd New Zealand Battalion and, having briefly taken the four 6-pounder guns out of combat, they moved to the assault. The battalion surrendered *en masse*[70].

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[69] The 22nd Armoured Brigade was made up of the 3rd C.L.Y. and the *Royal Scots Greys*. It had 31 *Grants*, 21 *Stuarts* and 23 *Crusaders*.

[70] The official British report said: *"The choice was between extermination and surrender and about 350 men were captured"*. (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, *op. cit.*, p. 349) Yes, the Italian infantry also often found itself defenceless in front the British tanks.

Simultaneously, the 5th Indian Brigade was also forced to suspend the advance. The III/10th *Baluch* Regiment was not able to overcome the resistance of the 28th Infantry's strongholds, while the IV/6th *Rajput Rifles*, the battalion on the left side, which had already broken up from the beginning, received fire on its flank from the II/27th Infantry and the I/26th Artillery, so much so that it had to retreat in disorder.

The two sides set about taking the measures necessary for resolving the unstable situation. The 13th Corps required the intervention of the 1st Armoured Division, which had already been provided for. It was necessary for the DAK to find mobile troops north and south, something which had not been estimated for at all. Consequently, all the morning and early afternoon the initiative was in British hands. At 17:00 it passed into those of the Axis.

General Lumsden, having heard from General Inglis, acting commander of the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division, that the course of the operation was not exactly proceeding as expected, ordered the 2nd Armoured Brigade (Brigadier Briggs) to advance between the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the 5th Indian Brigade. It seems that Briggs's two regiments got mixed up in the minefields and in the halting fire of a remainder of the *Brescia*. However, the third regiment joined the Indians who were remounting the attack.

At 10:00, the II/27th Infantry and the I/26th Artillery ceased to resist. Shortly after 11:00, the remainder of the III/27th Infantry flowed back to the I/28th Infantry that got a defensive flank ready against an attack from south, to contain the crumbling of the *Pavia*. In the early afternoon, two-thirds of the ridge was in enemy hands.

In the west, the 4th and 5th New Zealand Brigades were bringing order to their respective lines. They had occupied Hill 63 and had pushed up to Deir el Shein, but they were in crisis because different resistance centres of the 20th Infantry fought isolated from one another on the southern slopes of Ruweisat near Alam el Dihmaniya and a little bit everywhere, hindering the New Zealanders' persistent attempts to bring ahead armoured and wheeled vehicles. The intervention of the 22nd Armoured Brigade and the divisional reserve would have been required but they were both more or less engaged against the first German units that had reached the site. The elimination of the small pockets was slow. "*Gradually, however, the opposition was reduced by the artillery fire and, one by one, the various positions were occupied. At 16:00 vehicles started arriving on the ridge*"[71].

[71] PLAYFAIR I.S.O., *op. cit.*, p. 350.

The situation was very confused for the Italian and German headquarters. At 9:00 it was only known that the *Pavia* was still holding and that the breakthrough on *Brescia's* front was substantial, so much so that the New Zealanders could now look on Deir el Shein. There were no points of reference to be aware of the precise course of battle or formulate any appraisal of the extent of the enemy's success. General Lombardi, able to courageously escape those who had captured him, before getting seriously wounded in a Royal Air Force raid, could not provide a clear report due to a sudden interruption in communications with the units just after the beginning of the attack. Mancinelli telegraphed the High Command at 13:00:

> "Central sector situation very serious. Adversary contained but southeast of Deir el Shein they have attained new advantages on *Pavia* front which has had to cease in part. Preparing counteraction from west and south. It will offer possibility of success only if *Brescia* margins hold firm.
> Also 22nd German Division and other German units in north sector are hastening to the site. Naturally situation could become critical if concomitant attack developed in north sector. News of return of English fleet to Alexandria leads Marshal Rommel to consider possible landing on opposite front against which he would have nothing to oppose"[72].

Fortunately, the 9th Australian Division did not execute the operation ordered in the direction of El Miteiriya, perhaps because diverted by a thrust of the 21st *Panzer* intended to enlarge possession of Tell el Eisa. In fact, at 4:15, the 5th *Panzerregiment* had begun a new attempt with what it had left together with the II/104th German Fusiliers. Some little progress had been made, but the clashes soon weakened and gave over to intermittent artillery duels.

When the news from Ruweisat became alarming, Rommel sent Nehring the 3rd Reconnaissance Group and part of the 21st *Panzer* from north and the 33rd Scout Group and the *Baade* Group from south. Nehring organised a counterattack with these groups and the 15th *Panzer,* that was already fighting against the New Zealanders, which began on the 17th.

The German push, facilitated by smoke covering the battlefield and a light sand storm, first cut into the 4th New Zealand Brigade, which was overcome and lost the Brigade Headquarters and another 380 men, and the objective of the battle, Hill 63. Then they cut into the 5th, which was partially able to avoid the hit. A regiment of the 22nd Armoured Brigade final-

[72] DSCSAS, telegram 3402 dated 15/7/1942, 14:30 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

ly appeared towards Alam el Dihmaniya at 18:15, but it was late and the evening shadows put an end to the fighting.

The panorama of the day appeared "notably better" to the AIT at 21:00, as Mancinelli informed. In the north, the line remained unchanged also after the departure of the 21st *Panzer* and other German units. In the centre, the 9th *Bersaglieri* joined in the right of the *Trento* southwest of Deir el Shein, where the rest of the *Brescia* was gathered, and south of the trunk of the *Pavia*. The 15th *Panzer* was between Deir el Shein and Alam el Dihmaniya. In the southern sector the line now ran from El Mreir (*Ariete*), through Bab el Qattara (*Littorio*) to Gebel Khlakh-El Taqa (90th Light). The 21st *Panzer* remained west of Deir el Shein.

> "Tomorrow Marshal Rommel intends to reach the old line with the DAK", telegraphed Mancinelli, "essentially with the aim of taking back materials and probably men left in the lost zone. Subsequently, falling back to stronghold line estimated as most cost-effective is probable. Supposing success of foreseen operation, army will remain in serious crisis for lack of large infantry units after recent losses, in relation to line width and necessity to disengage mobile units. I think a visitation from his Excellency the Chief of Staff for complete examination of situation is necessary"[73].

What balance? The 2nd New Zealand Division announced the capture of 1,600 prisoners, but the climate was such that Kippenberger thought at first to have a good 4,000 at hand and Burrows affirmed that, if Ruweisat was conquered, there could even have been 20,000 prisoners taken![74] In any case Kippenberger added, "*There was also a great number of deaths, more Italians killed than I have ever seen on a battlefield, and lots of Germans, because the Germans generally fought to the death*"[75].

The New Zealand losses were also quite sizable as there were some 1,045 men between dead, wounded and prisoners. And, worse yet, the unpleasant feeling was rooting itself that the British armoured troops were ready to abandon the infantry had they judged their intervention to be unproductive or too dangerous. For explicit British admission, the crux consisted in a lack of theoretical and practical study of an efficient cooperation between an armoured division and one or more infantry forma-

[73] DSCSAS, telegram 3408 dated 15/7/1942, 23:40 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

[74] KIPPENBERGER H., *op. cit.*, p. 174.

[75] *Ibid.*

tions. Yet, among the troops of the Commonwealth, the psychologically negative conviction remained of a quite excessive British egoism.

The 16th of July

On the 16th the tension did not seem to be on the decrease. Around the El Alamein *box* the formation of the XXI Corps had undergone some modifications. The *Sabratha* had assumed responsibility for a good part of the semi-circular front on the Tell el Eisa salient using the Wolz Group, the I and III/328th German Infantry, the I/85th Infantry and the I/86th Infantry. The *Trieste* followed with the I/66th and the I/65th Infantry under the direct orders of the AIT Headquarters. Then there was the *Trento* with the 61st and 62nd Infantry Regiments.

At about 5:30 the 2/23rd Australian Battalion, reinforced with tanks from the 8th and the 44th *Royal Tanks*, started to attack Tell Eisa supported by violent artillery fire. First, it hit the I/85th Infantry which manned the 25 and 23 Hill strongholds. Just the previous day, the battalion had lost 124 men between dead and wounded (among which 8 officers), and 12 missing, and it had been reduced to little more than 200 men. After a short resistance, it had to give up. Then the Australians widened the action, faced and overcame the part of the I/382nd German Infantry north of the position and the I/86th, that was creating a stronghold south, in the area already held by the 21st *Panzer*. The moment was certainly serious, but around 11:00 a counterattack by the III/382nd conquered back all of the lost ground. In the afternoon the III/39th from the *Bologna* arrived and later the I/104th Infantry from the 21st *Panzer*, which inserted itself between the 382nd Infantry and the *Trieste*, in place of the 1/86th Infantry.

Let's also say that the conditions of the III/39th Infantry were not exactly brilliant: about 500 men, all recruits, organised only by reserve officers, including the commander (recalled to arms); lacking training and knowledge of their weapons, and with little shooting practice; they were tired because of a six days' movement by trucks without a single warm ration. The commander of the *Sabratha* refused to send them to the front-line and left them behind the immediate lines to achieve an acceptable cohesion.

Nehring tried to improve the situation in the centre. A first intervention by the 21st *Panzer* against the New Zealanders was stopped by the 2nd Armoured Brigade. A second effort, conducted by the 15th *Panzer* at 18:00, fully engaged the 5th Indian Brigade, but wore itself out around 21:00.

The 17th of July

The Italian and German losses in personnel, tanks and artillery weighed very heavily. And it was not over yet. To divert the DAK from Ruweisat, Auchinleck ordered an immediate resumption of activity north with the 9th Australian and south with the 7th Armoured.

The Australian task was entrusted to the 24th Brigade (Brigadier Godfrey). It dealt with occupying Tell el Makh Khad and continuing up to the Miteiriya ridge. The II/32nd Battalion was the first to move reinforced with a squadron of *Valentines* from the 44th *Royal Tanks* and one of *Crusaders* from the 9th Cavalry. Taking advantage of the last hours of darkness, it overwhelmed a small forward strongpoint held by a company of the XI/7th *Bersaglieri*, southwest of the track to Naqb Abu Dweiss. Then the battalion headed north-westwards. The sun had risen and, while the adversary artillery (four regiments of the 9th Australian, others from the 2nd South African and two British) shelled targets on the whole front of the XXI Corps, the II/65th Infantry of the *Trieste* was surrounded and then overrun. The commander of the regiment, Colonel Vaiarini, fell mortally wounded while trying to break the isolation of his unit. Shortly after the commander of the 66th Infantry was also seriously wounded, Lieutenant Colonel Zanetti. Not a single senior officer remained in the two regiments.

In the meantime the II/43rd battalion, significantly reinforced, pushed on deeply against the XXXII Sapper Battalion along the track. Navarini ordered the II/61st Infantry to move immediately from the extreme right of the *Trento* to support the Sappers. After this measure, the Kiehl Group and the 3rd and 580th Scout group rushed to the threatened stretch to eliminate the penetration of the mechanized troops. At 8:30 the meagre XXXII Sapper Battalion was overcome. The III/46th Artillery was destroyed after firing its last grenades and the I/46th Artillery was shooting at the enemy using the guns at zero elevation.

Mancinelli then telegraphed Bastico:

> "Following new breakthrough that occurred last night at the level of the *Trento-Trieste* junction, Marshal Rommel has judged overall army situation very delicate. Marshal Rommel asks Exc. Bastico and possibly Exc. Cavallero to come here urgently this very day for complete examination of situation and consequent determinations"[76].

[76] DSCSAS, telegram 3419 dated 17/7/1942, 8:35 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

The course of the fight remained undecided until 11:00, when the Australian pressure was stopped once and for all. Shortly before midday, Mancinelli reported the tactical moment to the High Command, as referred by the AIT Headquarters to the OKW:

> "(...) Following the adversary breakthrough in the Italian corps lines in the course of the last few days, and the annihilation of nearly four Italian divisions, AIT combat efficiency is so reduced that it is not possible to act offensively against an enemy that is increasing its strength of infantry, tanks and artillery.
> If enemy were able to realize other breakthroughs, El Alamein positions could not be kept (...)"[77].

But the counterattacks started to bear fruit and the enemy was pushed back to his departure bases, leaving almost all the captured material in the initial phase on the ground and hundreds of prisoners. Calm returned to the whole sector of the XXI Corps at about 13:00. Two further Australian efforts at Tell el Eisa against the Kiehl Group and further south against the left of the *Trieste* (I/65th and II/66th) proved useless. The 24th Australian Brigade announced the capture of 700 prisoners.

The state of the Italian divisions, according to the assessment made the evening of the 17th, was as follows:

> X Corps - *Brescia:* one battalion, no artillery; *Pavia:* two battalions, few vehicles;
> XX Corps - *Ariete:* one *bersaglieri* battalion, 15 tanks, one artillery group; *Littorio:* one *bersaglieri* battalion, 20 tanks, one gun; *Trieste:* three battalions, one artillery group;
> XXI Corps - *Sabratha:* no complete battalions, no artillery[78]; *Trento:* no significant losses;
> Army artillery: one battery.

Mussolini summoned Cavallero, Kesselring and Bastico to Berta on 16 July. It is clear that there were doubts and fears that the spectre of a

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[77] *Ibid.*, telegram 3421 dated 17/7/1942, 11:25 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

[78] Between 10 and 16 July the *Sabratha* lost 122 officers and 1,846 non commissioned officers and troops. Nevertheless on the 20th, in the evening, after the return of groups of soldiers who had been thought missing and prisoners who had managed to escape after a brief period of detention, and additional personnel arrived from rear bases, the Division had 94 officers and 1,606 troops (including 400 men from divisional units and services).

retreat lingered. The result of the discussions was the following telegram for Rommel, written by Cavallero, approved by Mussolini and signed by Bastico:

> "Duce has entrusted me with communicating the following to you:
> 1st - that he followed with interest the efforts you repeatedly put forth to defeat the adversary resistance;
> 2nd - that he appreciated the prompt intervention of mobile forces against adversary irruption attempt in the centre of our formations;
> 3rd - that he feels it is necessary at this point, after re-establishing the situation in that sector, to abstain from initiatives that submit our troops, infantry and mobile forces, to further wear, which would otherwise render their recovery for further tasks difficult; this goes particularly for the infantry divisions that live and fight in exceptionally uncomfortable conditions and feel the most wear;
> 4th - that it is necessary to take on formations corresponding to above task, a task that the Italo-German Army must consider fundamental and will accomplish in the shortest possible time;
> 5th - that, as has already been communicated, measures are underway on behalf of the Supreme Command and *Superasi* to have reinforcements of men and vehicles flowed as soon as possible to assure continuity of supplies to the Italo-German Army in a measure corresponding to its needs and its future tasks.
> I am pleased to add that, by order of Duce, Marshal Cavallero and I will leave tomorrow the 17th to meet you".

Instead, the resentment against the expressions used by the AIT Headquarters in its communication of 16 July to the OKW was shown by Bastico through the Italian General Staff in correlation with the AIT. The gesture of the high commander was right and proper, but the arguments adopted and the remedies suggested seemed only partially valid. In reality, Rommel's report of events, more than distorted, was twisted in such a way as to show one side white (German) and the other all black (Italian). But it was not the first time this had happened, nor would it be the last. Apart from this consideration, we greatly appreciate the direct frankness with which a soldier like General Gioda addressed his own troops after the first fight of Ruweisat[80].

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[79] MANCINELLI G., *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.

[80] Historical diary of the X Corps, ph. 4699/Op. dated 18/7/1942 - Annex no. 26.

The minutes of the meeting held at El Daba on 17 July at 16:30 do not exist, so here is transcribed what Cavallero noted in his diary:

> "Marshal Rommel communicated that a few days ago the enemy was already superior to us in tanks and infantries. He attacked; it seems he did not intend to carry out a great action, but success was easy for him and so he continued the action. Our troops were not many, but in place for some time with sufficient artillery formation and with reinforcement of 88 mm guns and the protection of the minefields. However, they were worn out and confronted with the surprise attack of the enemy they panicked a bit. The Italian soldiers retreated pursued by the British Infantry on a few tanks. A part of our troops were surprised in their sleep and did not have their shoes on. The trucks were insufficient for a retreat and thus a radio interception company of ours that did not find a place on these was captured.
> The attack was stopped thanks to Lieutenant Colonel... (von Mellenthin). We had to have troops intervene from... to stop the leak. It should be kept in mind that our armoured divisions are now reduced to little more than a reinforced battalion. The rest has dissolved. The position could not be more favourable for us, but the enemy leaves us no time to fortify ourselves.
> There have not been serious battles in the south up to now. There was, then, the New Zealand attack on the *Brescia* front.
> The day before yesterday, however, we were able to restabilise the situation taking many prisoners, but we were not able to free all of the *Pavia* and the *Brescia*. As a result, these divisions are reduced to two or three battalions and a group of artillery.
> Yesterday the DAK attacked to restabilise the situation in the zone, but the action was tough and it was not possible to restore the front. However, there are serious difficulties opposing the withdrawal of the infantries.
> This morning the enemy attacked the *Trieste* and *Trento* fronts again with two reinforced Australian battalions penetrating deeply[81].

[81] For the sake of objectivity, let's survey how, also without any prejudice or bad intention, it would be possible to give an excessively negative feeling for an event that is already itself unpleasant, but not dramatic. Here Cavallero writes that *two Australian battalions* broke through the front of two Italian divisions. Certainly, he knew the strength of the adversary tactical groups very well and that of the Italian "divisions", just as he knew perfectly well that it was about the fall of some strongholds. However, someone at a distance or those who would read lines of this sort after years cannot but shiver (if Italian) or laugh (if foreign), especially if not interested or able to have a detailed reconstruction of the fight. Now, if this way of expressing oneself (normal in war, where who is fighting is little inclined to measure words with a little political scale) is accepted in Cavallero, all the more reason to understand it in Rommel.

Everything that was still available was gathered to block it and it was successful. They have now been ordered to break contact and withdraw. The 90th Division will come north of the formation. The XX Army Corps will move south. He hopes to be able to bring the troops into new positions during the night. The battalions from the *Sabratha* retreated under the only fire of enemy artillery, which was truly brutal. In conclusion, the situation is critical. The forces still available will try to dominate, but if they take other hits like today, they will not be able to dominate the situation anymore, despite the chosen position is the best.

The enemy is also hurt. They have suffered serious losses and they still do everyday, due to air actions. Those who are more tenacious will win. The flow of forces, reserves and units, is necessary. He is asking which reinforcements are arriving. As for me, I show him the provisions taken for the railway and the coasting vessels. Marshal Rommel has communicated to me that he cannot guarantee being able to wait a week. If the reinforcements do not arrive, he will have to withdraw.

Kesselring points out that a retreat would put aviation in crisis. He would rather sacrifice all the artillery and go on (...).

Rommel answers that he needs the 88 mm guns above all and then the paratrooper battalion. I ask about the tank situation and Rommel specifies: *Ariete* 12, *Littorio* 16, DAK 30. He adds that, if the front gets broken through, there is no solution but a delay battle"[82].

With the visitors having taken leave, Rommel reported to Navarini and Nehring. The reinforcements received by the 8th Army and its aggressive attitude, he observed, made it so that the Ruweisat ridge, established to the advantage of the AIT, was transforming into a real threat for the left of the army. On the other hand, it was not possible to amputate the Australian wound because of the armoured divisions' continuous engagements everywhere. So it was necessary to give up Ruweisat and retreat the centre of the AIT. The operation had to take place that very night, gathering the rest of the X Corps at Deir el Shein.

Rommel was truly alarmed and discouraged. Two letters written to his wife bear witness to this. The first is from the evening of that 17 July:

"In this moment things are going really badly for me (...). The enemy is using its superiority, above all in the infantry, to destroy the Italian for-

[82] Cavallero's Diary, 17 July 1942.

mations one by one and the German units are too weak to resist alone. It is enough to make one weep".

The second is from the following day:

> "Yesterday was a particularly heavy and critical day. We came out again. But I cannot go on like this much longer, otherwise the front will fall apart. From the operational point of view, this is the hardest time I have ever been through. There are reinforcements in sight, obviously, but if we will get to see them is another matter. You know what an incurable optimist I am. But there are situations in which everything is dark. However, this time will also go by"[83].

On the 18th Cavallero reported the meeting he had had with Rommel to Mussolini. There are not any notes or documents about this either, however, two things appeared clear at this point. Firstly, the hope for an imminent run to the Nile had vanished and the presence of Mussolini in Cirenaica - without ever having talked to Rommel or the Italian commanders at the front - had become untenable. Secondly, it was necessary to set in motion a major boost to maritime transports in favour of the AIT. So, on the 19th, Cavallero returned to El Daba with Bastico and Barbasetti.

Bastico made a note of some details about the meeting:

> "Now", Rommel said, just having a look at those present, "the situation is less tense following the night-time retreat to more solid positions, but the crisis has not disappeared. The forward formation lacks depth and I do not have reserves. For me, the crisis will only be resolved when the reinforcements arrive and I can withdraw the armoured troops from the front and keep them behind as manoeuvre reserves (...).

Cavallero listened to him and released his nervousness by tapping his fingers on the table. "*All of this*", he rebutted, "*would be correct if reinforcements were not on their way*". He assured the immediate availability of the *Bologna*, to replace the *Sabratha* which was to be demobilized, and the *Giovani Fascisti*, not to mention the imminent and already planned paratrooper division, the *Pistoia* and the *Brennero*, as well as numerous

[83] LIDDELL HART B., *The Rommel Papers*, cited, pp. 257-258.

reserves[84]. He pointed out the arrival, on the German side, of the 164th Infantry Division, the *Ramcke* Paratrooper Brigade and an anti-aircraft brigade made up of 72 anti-aircraft 88 mm guns, besides of course the reserves. Though a little sceptical, Rommel commented that, on the basis of this, it was even possible to establish a fortified system from the coast to the Qattara Depression, also drawing from the numerous existing reinforcement materials available in Tobruk and Matruh. Cavallero naturally agreed, but wanted to deliver a judgement, *"Retreat is a term that needs to be erased from the vocabulary of war in this sector!"* To which Rommel replied sharply, *"It's not about words or terms. War is made with vehicles and equipment and only with them"*[85].

Keeping in mind that on 15 July a column sent by the Gialo garrison pushed all the way to the Giarabub oasis and occupied it, the possibility of also taking the Siwa oasis as quickly as possible was examined, in order to eliminate the main enemy base for scout and disturbance activities.

Mussolini received Cavallero, Bastico, and Barbasetti that evening in Berta at 20:20. Fougier and Kesselring were also present. Hearing Cavallero's report, he handed over a personally written note. It was about considerations of a strategic and tactical nature, whose salient points were two:

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[84] In Rome, they were working hard to send the Airborne Brigade to Northern Africa by intensified air transport. The name of the Brigade was not yet *Folgore* but, temporarily, *Chasers of Africa*. All things considered, it could reach its destination by the first week of August. A second division (*Pistoia* or *Piave*) could start moving by rail through the Balkans in a very short time and concentrate on the Piraeus by the end of July. It would be in Egypt by mid-August, using air and sea transport at the same time.

Besides the two divisions, (the expedition of the *Brennero* was still *sub judice*) it had been foreseen to send at least 3-4,000 men from various units by air. Their materiel (tanks, 75/18 self-propelled guns, equipment for railroad workers and pontonier units) had to be transported by motor rafts and convoys. After unloading their cargo in Marsa Matruh, the motor rafts would be at the disposal of the High Command for coastal traffic.

[85] In Rommel's memoirs there is no mention of this second visit. Referring to the visit that took place on the 17th, (as it clearly appears in *The Rommel Papers*) he reported the meeting with Kesserling and Cavallero in the following terms: *"Again, the latter [Cavallero] blatantly minimized the importance of our logistic needs, which I had pointed out with extreme clarity. We discussed the subject over and over, until Kesserling and I asked for concrete decisions.*

Also this conversion clearly revealed how serious the situation was and how little we could rely on the Italian superior authorities. Cavallero promised that, from now on, the supplies for the army would increase with the help of barges and, in a short time, the railway line of the front would be working again. He also pledged to send other Italian units. Nevertheless, we were quite wary, considering all the experiences we had had, and time showed us we were right" (E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 202).

Considering the subjects dealt with, one may have the impression that the quotation above is the summary of two conversations, but above all of that of the 19th (see no. 51 of the weekly *Tempo* from 16/12/1958, cited article, pp. 30-35, and Cavallero's Diary).

"1. (...) The battle of Tobruk is over. Tomorrow's one will be the battle of the Delta. The time to prepare this battle must be counted in weeks, but not a single minute must be lost to prepare it in what has at this point become a battle of speed between the enemy and us.
2. The first *conditio sine qua non* in preparing the battle is that of preserving the current departure bases at all costs. Every other hypothesis has to be discarded *beforehand* (...)"[86].

Mussolini left for Italy the following day, 20 July. At about noon an Italian reconnaissance unit reached Siwa, which had been abandoned by the enemy. In the afternoon, the New Zealanders made another effort at Deir el Shein. At 16:45 a violent artillery preparation on the positions held by the 19th Infantry of the Brescia began. After about half an hour, when the intensity of the fire had decreased and the dust had cleared, the I/19th Infantry spotted groups of Germans in disordered retreat with the adversary chasing behind. In order to avoid hitting friendly troops, the Battalion opened fire at 300-400 metres, along with the flow of the barrage fire of the rest of the 46th Artillery, and rapidly pushed back the unsure attempt.

Relating to the conversations between Rommel and Cavallero it can be pointed out that the latter had not mentioned a matter coming from Berlin about France, whose policy had begun to supply reason for worry, and which had not been presented by von Rintelen to the Supreme Command in a very clear way. In short, a deployment of Italian divisions at the French border had been considered, not to mention an occupation of southern France and the use of naval forces to block the French Mediterranean coast and Corsica. But for Italy a particular, not new, necessity had assumed the highest importance. On 7 July Cavallero, who had returned to Rome by plane for a few days on the 6th, had arranged the transformation of the C3 Emergency (occupation of Malta) into the C4 Emergency (occupation of Tunisia). We shall come back to this subject, however, according to von Rintelen or, better yet, according to the OKW, that problem had to be kept separate from the others. It was to be considered as a pure eventuality, just in case it presented itself in peremptory terms. Instead, the thoughts of all the Italian leaders were in agreement in these regards: the Tunisia operation had to be prepared at all costs with precedence above all others, but only upon completion of the campaign in Egypt, which, according to Cavallero, should be interpreted as short term.

[86] DSCS, document dated 19/07/1942.

It might be interesting to look at the oscillations in Mussolini's feelings about the prospects for a dazzling success in Egypt, as seen through Ciano's comments:

> 20 July: "Rome. Mussolini will also return this evening. This return, together with the news from Libya, convinces the public that many of the rosy dreams for Egypt have vanished, at least for now. Now we will see if the formation at El Alamein is advantageous or not. In some circles of the General Staff the advantages of a retreat are being considered (...)"[87].
> 21 July: "The Duce is in a good mood. Above all because he is convinced that in two or three weeks or so the march forward in Egypt will be taken up again and that they will reach the great destinations of the Delta and the Canal. He is so certain about it that he left his personal luggage in Libya, signifying a quick return (Bismarck on the other hand - based on information from General Rintelen - considers our offensive postponed *sine die* because the exhaustion of our troops was more than significant and the reinforcements that have reached the British were superior to our estimates).
> Naturally Mussolini breathed the anti-Rommel air of the Libyan Headquarters and took it out on the German Marshal, all the more because he did not feel the need to pay him a visit during the more than three weeks that he had been there. The attitude of the [German] soldiers is also insolent (...).
> 22 July: "Mussolini has written a letter to Hitler, a report on his sojourn in Libya and his short stay at Athens. Actually, the principle aim of the message was to clarify the point of view regarding the *Sabratha* Division because Rommel had sent a denigrating telegram to Germany *"that Mussolini will never forgive him for"* (...).
> Mackensen visits under any pretext (...). He does not think the offensive can be taken up again before October, and has many reservations (...).
> 23 July: "I told the Duce about the German ambassador's predictions and he, after two days of ostentatious certainty, dropped the mask and spoke frankly. He is furious with the military who *"exposed him to making a bad impression by going to the front for the second time during less than happy moments"* (he was referring to his trip to Albania). This time he had ordered Cavallero to clearly telegraph him the word *Tevere* when he felt the march of our troops to the Canal was secure. The word

[87] This eventuality is not contemplated in any notes or memoirs of the High Command or the Army General Staff. So, it is to be considered as a personal opinion.

Tevere had arrived Friday, 27 June. The Duce had to delay the departure by two days because a cyclone had prevented the flight. Only once he had arrived did he realise that things were not going well and that *"Rommel's strategy had ups and downs"*.
Cavallero's appointment as Marshal could not be avoided because he found himself *"between Rommel and Kesselring like Christ among the thieves"*. Moreover, Bastico will also be appointed Marshal and other Generals after him and *"I am not excluding my doorkeeper, Navarra, either"*.
The forecasts are now quite reserved. In Mussolini's opinion, it is necessary to avoid any retreats because there is no telling where they could end up".
24 July: "The tone of the Duce's speeches is more and more anti-German. Today the starting points were two: a statement by General Marras concerning the lack of esteem in which our military contribution is held by the German General Staff and the incomprehension of our needs and our industrial aspirations (...)"[88].

A brief comment on Mussolini's venting on 23 July is necessary. The Duce's behaviour is typical of a politician. He does not feel responsible for anything. It is always somebody else's fault. He had *wanted* to get tied up tightly with Germany and now he cannot stand their self-importance and arrogance. He had *wanted*, unrequested, to go to war (believing it already won by the ally) and now he gets offended that Germany holds the Italian military contribution in little esteem, perfectly aware of its lack of preparation and inadequacy. He had *wanted* a parallel war and, after realising the absurdity of the matter, he complains of the ally's incomprehension for our needs. He had *wanted* the highest military rank and the command of all the operating armed forces and he does not realise that the presence of the Commander in Chief is far more important when things are going bad than when everything is going for the best. He had *wanted* to lead the triumph in Egypt and, in the very difficult moment of the consequent counter-hit on the halt imposed by the enemy at El Alamein, he does not even think of visiting the Headquarters of the Italian Army Corps, at very least those at the front; yet, he takes offence when Rommel does not pay him a "courtesy visit". He had *wanted* to go to Albania and then to Cirenaica to demonstrate to the Italian people and the world that he was bringing the armies towards victory under his personal leadership and he did not realise that, even if the events of the war had received the

[88] CIANO G., *op. cit.*, pp. 637-638.

help of Mars, all of the military (friends and enemies) would have smirked at him ironically.

Let's be clear. He was also certainly badly advised. It does not turn out that anyone had clearly pointed out to him the inappropriateness of the trip (as was done on the other hand with Churchill in London) or told him explicitly that a visit to El Daba was much more important than one to the harbour equipment at Tobruk or an airport back behind the lines[89]. Fears of the entourage for his personal safety? Probably, but a real leader, political or otherwise, should also be ready to risk his life when it is necessary.

As for the contemptuous appraisals of the main military leaders, if he was not satisfied with them, why did he keep them in those high positions of responsibility? This is also typical of many politicians. They do not take responsibility for the choices they make in collaborators. A comparison with other government leaders or dictators of the era does not even lend it itself. They, in uniform or plainclothes, truly *commanded*. Stalin had all of his defeated Generals shot, apart from rank and possible former merits, like the way of the French Revolution. Hitler generally sent them away in disgrace. Churchill first gave them support and comfort then he threw them out at once, but he was as honest as he was hot-headed and would end up recognising their merits and extenuating circumstances. Roosevelt, as much as he was certainly a bit intimidated by General Marshal's gigantic personality, never hesitated to dismiss incapable or unfortunate command-

[89] There are episodes that remain engraved on a person's memory, positively or negatively. They are not necessarily indicative of a character, but they are significant in some way. One of the "negative" episodes was described by a journalist during the Duce's visit to a British prisoners' camp which had been set up in a rush. Mussolini, accompanied by the Italian lieutenant commanding the camp, advanced into the throng of South African prisoners who, at least in the beginning, did not recognize him. *"Some of them, sprawling in the tents, did not even move. So, Marshal Cavallero, while Mussolini was advancing always speaking with the officer, hurled himself at the prisoners and shouted, "Stand up!" They obeyed, standing up slowly"* (G. PEDOJA, *La disfatta nel deserto*, Rome, OET, 1946, quoted in LUCIO CEVA, *Africa Settentrionale 1940-1943*, Rome, Bonacci, 1982, p. 113). Now, the image of a Chief of General Staff hurling himself and shouting like a sergeant at a group of prisoners to make them stand up in *His* presence is very, very unpleasant.

Another episode, reported by the same journalist, deals with Mussolini more closely but has a different flavour: *"Some lorries with trailers, filled with prisoners, were travelling along the Balbia Way, moving westwards. The Duce suddenly frowned and asked for a submachine gun. Juggling with it, he moved to the side of the road and said to those following him, "If someone makes the sign of Victory, I'll just shoot him (...)"* (quoted in L. CEVA, *op. cit.*, p. 114). Everybody is free to believe that Mussolini was a bloodthirsty person and seriously wanted to put his threat into action. On the contrary, we believe he was only showing off and his action was but a stupid challenge in doubtful taste and style. He did not, however, have any real murderous intent. Mussolini liked posing as a "tough man" and, in his opinion, emphasizing the pose of his mandible strengthened that image. But he was by then a man who tried to ignore the abyss he was approaching.

ers whatever the case may have been. Instead, Mussolini complained. It was convenient, very convenient to complain of being "badly served!"

General Marras had also efficiently depicted how the struggle in Egypt was being followed in Germany:

> "The huge interest the rapid progress of operations in Egypt had provoked in these leadership circles now appeared significantly subdued. It is difficult to judge if this is dependant on the slow down the operations have undergone and the difficulties that have presented themselves or on the favourable development of the operations in Russia, which, naturally, have diverted and refocused the attention not only of the leading elements, but of the people (...)"[90].

4. The Second Battle at Ruweisat (21-22 July)

The interception service and the *Enigma* messages continued to provide Auchinleck with probative elements for an accurate assessment. Between 17 and 19 July they reported that the 21st *Panzer* had 17 efficient tanks, the 15th just 13 and the XX Corps about 60. Even if this news was not accurate and keeping in mind that the AIT was reinforcing itself significantly, that the repaired tanks were returning to the divisions and that a large quantity of mines were laid on the battlefield, it did not seem wrong to suppose the enemy was in a bad situation and that the Italians were even on the brink of collapse. So, it was the right moment for a disruptive attack. An attack that London had explicitly requested.

Churchill had sent Auchinleck a letter on 12 July halfway between incitement and resignation. Everyone, he explained, knew all to well how the Japanese threat in the direction of India and the disastrous overturn of the 8th Army had completely dismantled the northern front in the Middle East, a front that the German successes in Russia were causing fears for in the immediate future. Being unable to send more than a couple of divisions at most to that theatre before the end of October, the only way to put the border with Turkey and Russia in a condition to face a German offensive from the north

> "is that you defeat or destroy General Rommel or at least force him to retreat to a safe distance. If this is achieved before the end of September,

[90] DSCS, ph. 2044/S dated 1247/1942, from the Italian Military Mission in Germany.

the Australian and New Zealand forces could return to their bases in Palestine and Syria and the 41st Division could be sent directly to the northern front.

We shall send the 56th Division with the August convoy and we are preparing another division for the eastern front. A British Division could possibly be withdrawn from India, if the southern Russian flank showed signs of subsiding.

Yet, it must be admitted that if you were not able to defeat and annihilate Rommel, no possibility would exist to carry out a sufficient transfer of troops northwards and we would have to continue to hope solely for keeping the Russian front (...)"[91].

Churchill's concept could be defined as convincing in part. Only by destroying or at least heavily defeating the AIT would the accounts be balanced. Simply pushing back "*to a safe distance*" did not offer solid guarantees. However, in the spirit of these orders, Auchinleck examined the main problem. It dealt with recognising how to open a breach in the Italo-German front and keeping it open to allow a deep penetration with the bulk of the armour with the purpose of cutting Rommel's supply line or to surround his infantry divisions.

It was understood that the adversary's intention was to proceed with a distribution of forces laid out in such a way that, anywhere a British attack was registered, the German mechanised units would be able to intervene with a counterattack. Therefore it was necessary to divert the said reserves from the pre-selected zone for the break.

As a matter of fact, Rommel had ordered new partial retreats on 19 July to guarantee the AIT sufficient tranquillity, leaving scout elements ahead on the current positions as a security echelon. The new organisation foresaw a continuous series of battalion strongholds structured in three sectors (Sketch N. 17); the northern sector entrusted to the XXI Corps Headquarters (383rd German Infantry, 125th German Infantry, the *Trento* Division Infantry, III/39th Infantry from the *Bologna*, a tactical group from the 90th Light and the X/7th *Bersaglieri*); the central sector assigned to the DAK Headquarters (the *Brescia* and the *Pavia* Division Infantry, 15th and 21st *Panzer*); the southern sector directed by the XX Corps Headquarters (the *Ariete* and the *Littorio* Armoured Divisions, the *Trieste* Motor Division, the *Menton* Group, elements from the 90th Light, the IV *Chasers* Battalion[92]).

[91] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, p. 668.

[92] It dealt with the IV/157th Italian Paratroopers.

Naturally, the insertion of new units, the substitution of others, and the transfer of others still brought a series of movements that were not always feasible in the restricted time period. In any case, the worst aspect of the matter remained the material impossibility of recovering mobile units to make them available for the manoeuvre, whether for defence or offensive inspiration.

It has already been seen how much Rommel was forced to resort to moving German divisions above all, as they were fittest for the specific task, but also objectively *toughest*, to block the leaks that were suddenly opened here and there. Auchinleck counted precisely on this fact, though probably not imagining to what extent the AIT had tied up the territorial garrison in a precarious defensive line.

Auchinleck decided for a double attack. The essential element of the plan was the necessity of the two actions taking place not simultaneously, but rather one after another. The relationship of place and time had to be such that the second was launched when the majority of the Italo-German armoured forces were entangled in the difficulties caused by the first.

The second attack, to be launched no more than 48 hours after the first, would naturally constitute the main determining effort. The armoured units at hand were the 22nd Brigade equipped with *Grants* and the 23rd which could rely on 18 *Mathildas* and 130 *Valentines*. Truthfully, the latter, though composed of infantry tanks, was trained as an armoured division, (the 8th) but it was thought that the disadvantage would be largely compensated by the presence of well-prepared infantry and strong artillery support. It could be ready by 21 July, so, given the urgency, General Gott was entrusted with carrying out the first action 21-22 July with the 13th Corps, with the precise aim of breaking the Italo-German front in the Deir el Abyad-el Mreir stretch.

If the success provoked the engagement of all of Rommel's armoured reserves, on the 24th the 30th Corps would be thrown into the struggle to take control of the entire El Miteiriya embankment and eventually continue in depth between Tell el Aqqaqir and Deir el Abyad. On the whole, the 13th Corps had three New Zealand and two Indian brigades with 300 artillery guns and two armoured brigades with 274 tanks to launch against a seven-kilometre front.

The highest secrecy surrounded the plan. Gott held no briefings and each unit remained in the dark about the tasks entrusted to those at their sides. The 22nd Armoured Brigade should have provided a powerful support to the New Zealand Infantry, but Brigadier Fisher refused to attack at

Sketch

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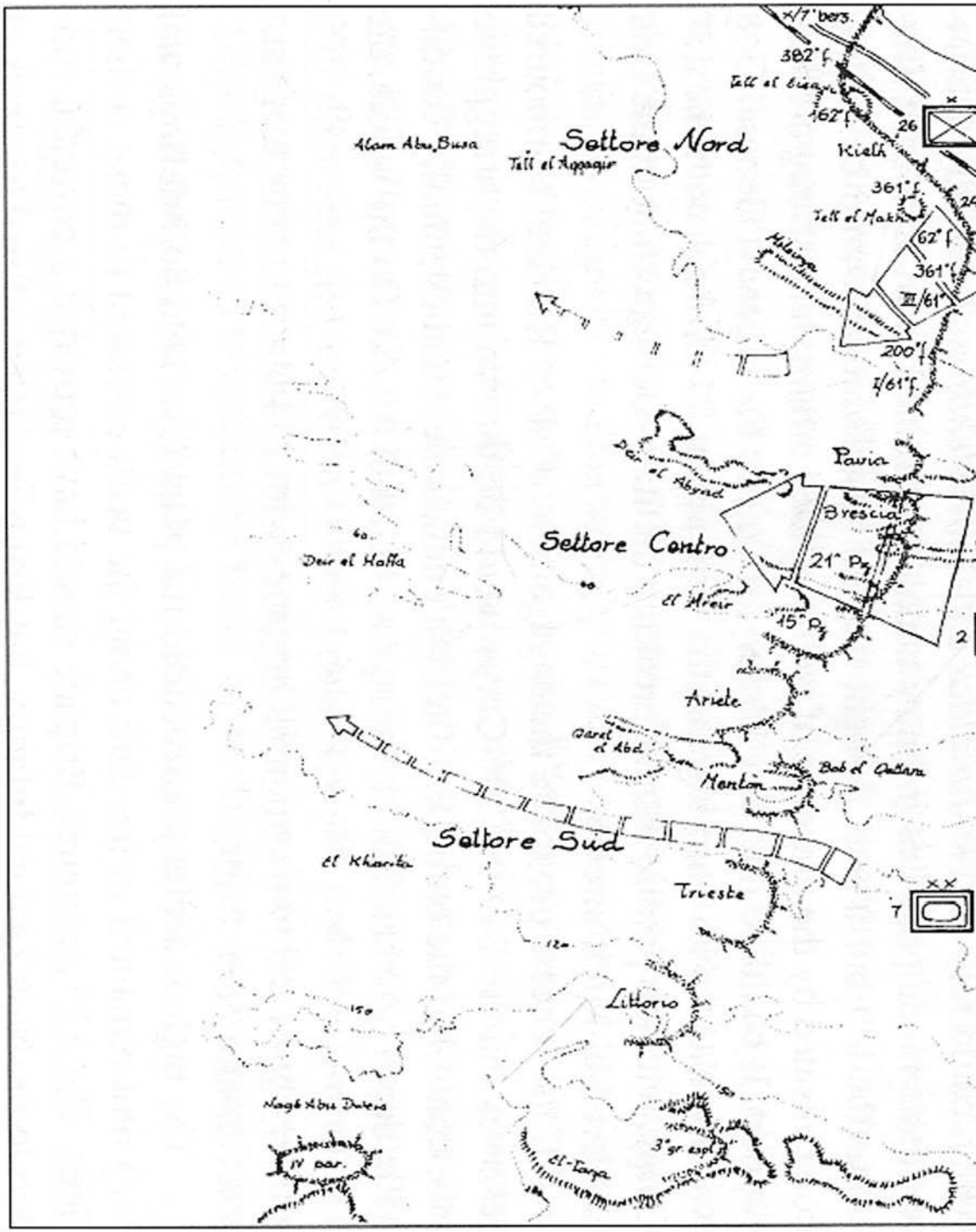
ON 21 JULY AND AU



n N. 17
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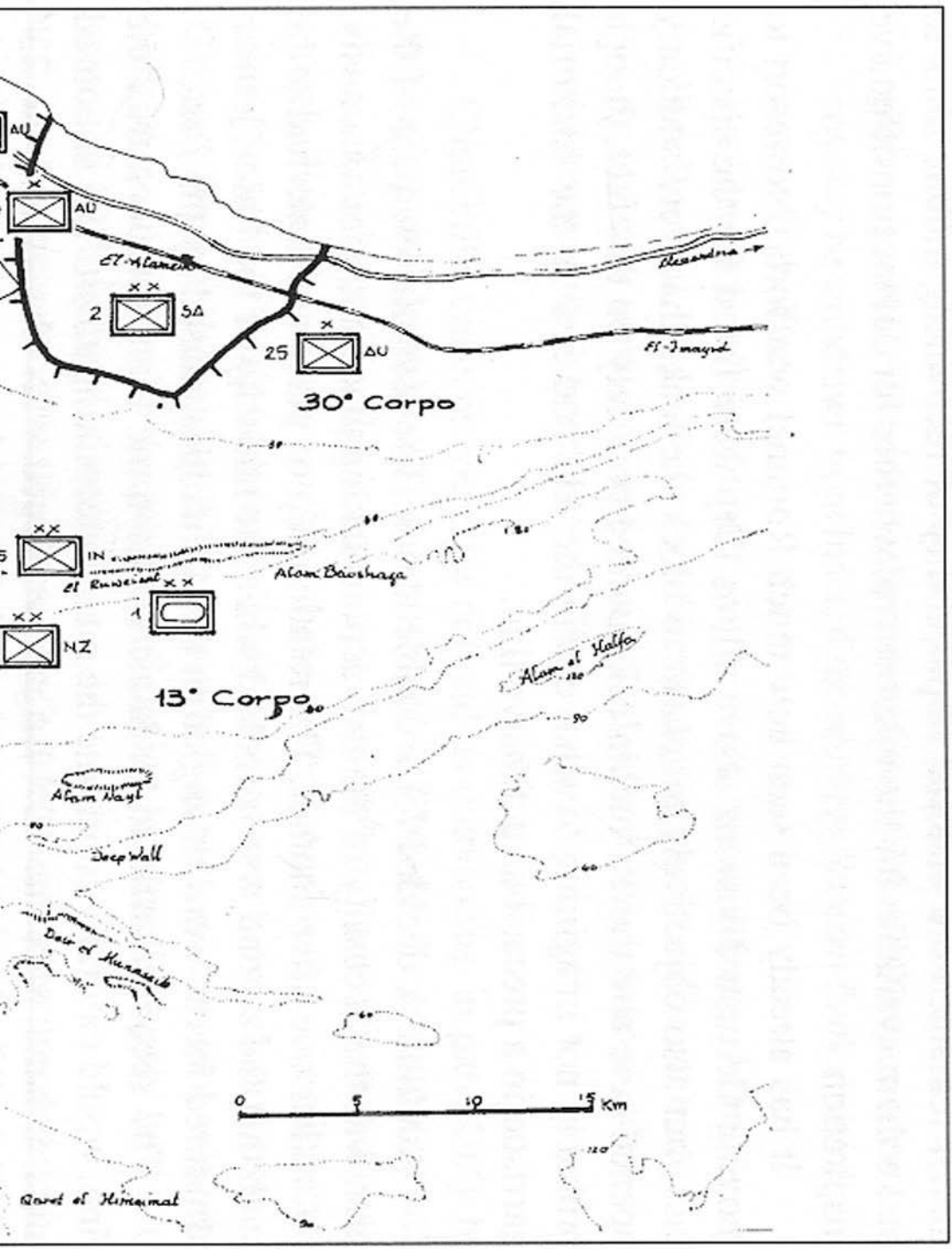

night. Kippenberger, who already had reasons for irritation with the British tank units, returned from divisional reporting in a bad mood, prophesying, "*It will be another bloody disaster*!"[93].

According to Gott's manoeuvre plan (Sketch N. 18), the 5th Indian Infantry Division had to seize Hill 63 of Ruweisat and Deir el Shein with the 161st Brigade in the first line and the 9th in the second, while the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division would take control of a zone east of Mreir with the 6th Brigade in the first line and the 5th in the second. Then the 23rd Armoured Brigade had to advance between the 161st Indian and the 6th New Zealand to the height of the El Mreir Depression opening a breach, through which the second line brigades would be able to proceed to consolidate the success some kilometres west. The 22nd Armoured Brigade had to protect the southern flank, while the 2nd Armoured Brigade had to intervene against possible Axis counterattacks after the conquest of the initial objectives. Nine artillery regiments had the task of preparing and supporting the attack. The 7th Armoured Division, composed of the 4th Armoured Light Battalion, the 7th Motor Brigade and the 69th Infantry, would only conduct a disruptive action further south.

The break in the Italo-German line was entrusted to two brigades lacking war experience and the same could be said of the 23rd Armoured Brigade, charged with pursuing the action. This was undoubtedly a disadvantage, even though not as remarkable as the too little time allowed for organisation. To avoid the imbalances occurred during the first fight for Ruweisat, Gott inserted a sentence into his order of operations clearly directed to the commanders of the armoured units, "*All commanders be ready to act with the greatest energy. Without waiting for detailed orders, they will act according to the spirit of these general orders and carry on the pursuit until the enemy forces have been completely destroyed*"[94].

On the 18th an unexpected accident occurred. Brigadier Briggs, commander of the 2nd Armoured Brigade, and General Lumsden, commander of the 10th Armoured Division, were wounded in an air bombing and General Gatehouse, commander of the 10th Armoured Division detached to the Delta zone, was urgently called to assume the command of the 1st Armoured Division. This happened on the 20th in the evening.

On 21st July, the Italo-German formation in the threatened sector on the 21st was the following: the *Pavia* (I and II/28th Infantry and III/26th

[93] KIPPENBERGER H., *op. cit.*, p. 184.
[94] BARNETT C., *op. cit.*, p. 317.

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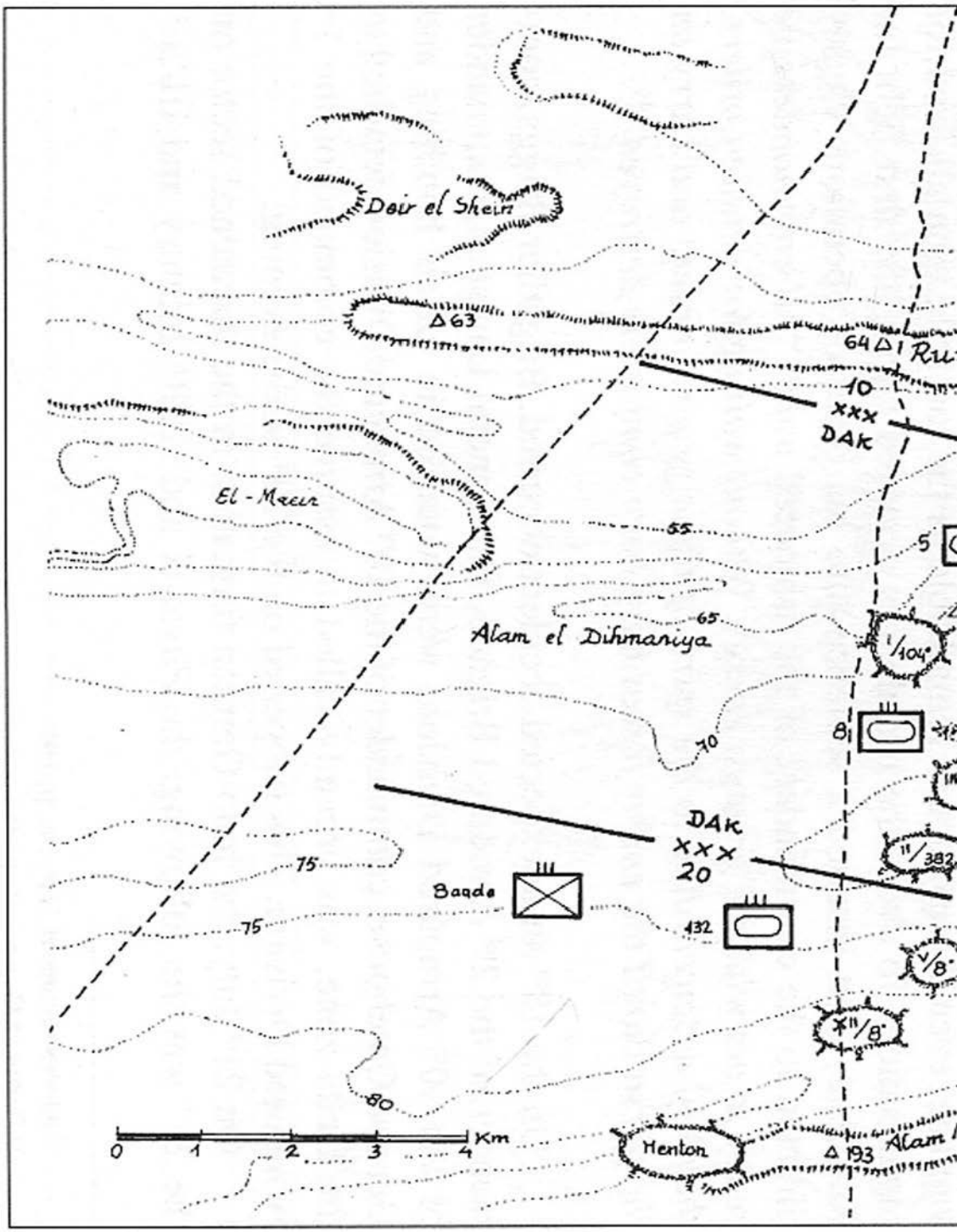
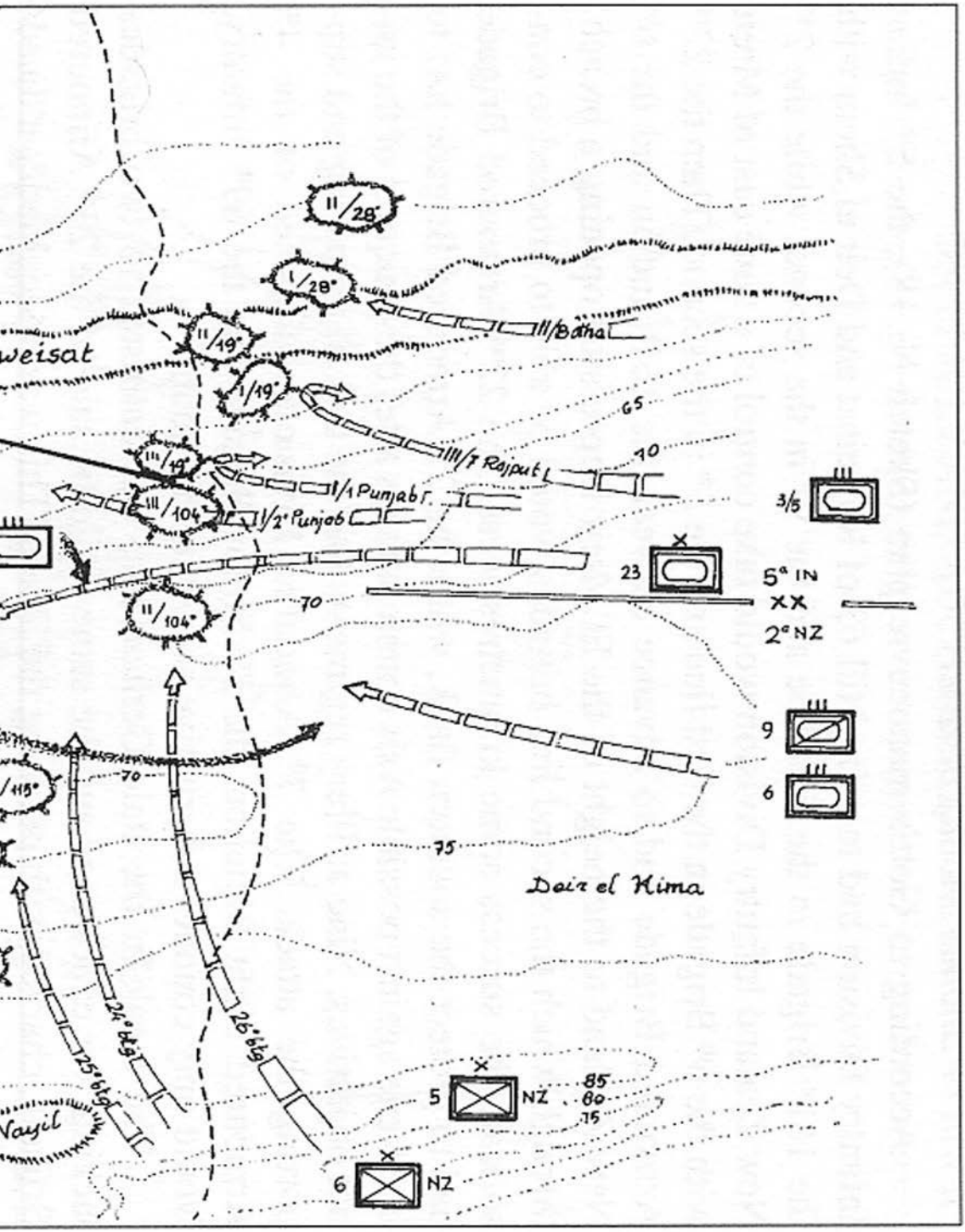
"THE SECOND FIGHT F



tch N. 18
OR RUWEISAT (21-22 JULY)"



Artillery) had replaced the 200th German Infantry northeast of Deir el Shein; the *Brescia* units (the 19th Infantry, a provisional battalion composed of the remains of the 20th Infantry and the III/1st *Celere* Artillery) took position at Deir el Shein. The 104th German Infantry from the 21st *Panzer* was in the central stretch and had its III Battalion on Hill 63 of Ruweisat (old objective of the New Zealanders), the II on the southern slopes and the I on the eastern edge of El Mreir.

Further south the III/115th Infantry and the II/382nd Infantry from the 15th *Panzer* followed. The 5th and 8th *Panzerregiment* were detached behind the forward strongholds. The *Baade* group was placed to the rear not in sector reserve, but rather acting as army reserve.

At zero hour, the 6th New Zealand Brigade (Brigadier Clifton) left the departure bases and attacked north, with the 24th and 26th Battalions. The difficulty in keeping the direction at night, crossing minefields that were hardly recognisable, and the defence's halt fire added up negatively. While the 26th Battalion was able to reach its objective, the 24th had to march past the II/382nd German Infantry and the III/115th German Infantry, so that it dispersed badly. The arrival of the 25th Battalion did not allow for an efficient reiteration of the effort because it was stopped and put in disorder by the II/382nd German Infantry. In addition, Brigadier Clifton urged the Division Headquarters at about 3:30 to be ready for an imminent counter-attack by enemy tanks. Instead, much more opportunely, General Nehring wanted the 8th *Panzerregiment* to wait for the light of dawn to attack and when this happened, just after 5:00, the 6th New Zealand Brigade was overwhelmed and even its commander was taken prisoner with 500 of his men. The intervention of a battalion of the 5th Brigade was of little help, so the Division rapidly went back to its departure positions.

"*The worst thing was*", commented Kippenberger, "*we had counted on our tanks again in vain and the bitterness was extreme*"[95]. In fact, the 2nd Armoured Brigade moved with two regiments, the 9th Lancers and the 6th *Royal Tanks*, but one was completely stopped by the German anti-tank guns and the other just as completely blocked by the minefields. With this, the 2nd New Zealand closed the match for that day. Overall, it had lost 904 men including 69 officers. General Inglis's dissatisfaction was such that he wrote to Freyberg, still in hospital, "*I completely refused to participate in another operation of this type, as long as I command. I said that the* sine qua non *is having the tanks assigned to me and under my direct control*"[96].

[95] KIPPENBERGER H., *op. cit.*, p. 188.

[96] MAUGHAN B., *op. cit.*, p. 578.

The 161st Indian Brigade's action (Brigadier Hughes) faced less stormy events, but not all happy. On its northern flank the 2nd Battalion from the *Botha* Regiment was moving, entrusted with occupying a little depression northeast of Deir el Shein. The first two battalions of the echelon were assigned the main objectives: Deir el Shein, defended by the 19th Infantry of the *Brescia*, should be the prerogative of the III/7th *Rajput* and Hill 63 of Ruweisat, defended by the III/19th Infantry of the *Brescia* and the III/104th Infantry of the 21st Panzer, would go to the I/1st Punjab.

The remaining troops of the X Corps were rather shocked and Gioda had intervened energetically:

> "In my recent visits to the divisions I am noticing the spirit of the troops (including officers) is very low in tone. Everyone tends to hyperbolise when talking about difficulties. All say that the tasks entrusted to us are superior to our strength and everyone, in short, wants a rest.
> But let's speak frankly! We have been beaten on the positions that we occupied and the enemy halted. But we cannot exclude that they will attack again. The army does not have other forces to relieve us. And so? I ask (...). Let's patch up the divisions the best we can and go ahead with the organisation of the defence (...). Remember that every relaxation, every weakness in this moment is criminal. I am going to hit them inexorably"[97].

The commander's words had an effect and the units responded.

Under the drumming fire of the British battery groups, the enemy attack began. The II/*Botha* reached the assigned position without difficulty. On the other hand, the III/7th *Rajput* was pushed back hard by the I/19th Infantry and, as much as they reiterated their attempts, nothing came to a head. Rather, it left about 50 prisoners in Italian hands. As for the I/1st *Punjab*, the matter was more complex. Hill 63 of Ruweisat was really a double stronghold. The III/19th Italian Infantry was on the northwest side and the III/104th German Infantry was placed east. The struggle was confused. The first assault was immediately pushed back, also thanks to the shooting barrage of the III/46th Artillery[98], but the I/2nd Punjab, getting over

[97] Historical diary of the X Corps, ph. 4747/op. dated 20/7/1942.

[98] Kippenberger saw the attack of the I/1st Punjab from a distance: *"The advance developed smoothly for about a mile. It brought to mind one from 1916, with the waves that followed each other well aligned. Then it was halted by heavy fire (...). The men remained standing, defenceless, for a few minutes, then the whole mass started running back (...)"* (*Op. cit.*, p. 189) Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that Kippenberger did not specify the indicative of the unit, but limited himself to speaking of "Indians" and set the action at 11:00 in the morning.

the former, renewed the pressure concentrating itself against Hill 63. Exploiting the 23rd Armoured Brigade's entry into the action, it was able to occupy the German position and capture, as it seems, 190 prisoners.

The intervention of the 23rd Armoured Brigade[99] was preceded by a little argument between Gatehouse, who would have preferred widening the corridors in the minefields, and Gott, who instead gave precedence to the opportunity to exploit the confusion existing in the German lines, according to the radio interceptions. However, he decided to move the direction of the attack southwards, erroneously thinking that he was sending the Brigade into a zone for the most part free of mines. So the 40th and 46th *Royal Tanks* set out at 8:00. Immediately the British radio connections failed and Gatehouse was wounded. In the first minefield the British regiments lost 17 tanks and 13 tanks respectively. The 40th *Royal Tanks* continued undaunted and reached the edge of El Mreir after a couple of hours with 15 tanks. The 46th disbanded. Some armoured vehicles met up with those of the 40th at the objective while the others disappeared. When the 5th *Panzerregiment* attacked the rest of the 23rd Armoured Brigade, the match ended in the blink of an eye. The Brigade lost 203 men and had 40 tanks destroyed and 47 seriously damaged.

While the 23rd Armoured Brigade executed its "charge of the 600" the 13th Corps Headquarters tried to stream the 2nd Armoured Brigade into the struggle in order to help probable New Zealand and armoured resistance pockets. The difficulty to overcome was always the same: the minefields. A very narrow corridor was opened, even further south than the preceding direction of attack and, at 17:00, the 9th Lancers and then the *Royal Tanks* began crossing it. It was a disaster because at that point the zone was strictly kept under check by the anti-tank guns and the tanks of the 15th *Panzer*. After three quarters of an hour the temporary commander of the 1st Armoured Division yielded and ordered to retreat the 2nd Armoured Brigade. Another twenty tanks were lost.

The 22nd was the only unhurt armoured Brigade. Entrusted with protecting the left flank of the army corps, it had pushed elements westwards, thrusting without much conviction against an *Ariete* stronghold which easily nullified the action.

Before passing over to the El Alamein zone, some minor events in the southern sector are worth being mentioned. The movements ordered

[99] The brigade was taken from the 50th *Royal Tank Regiment*, sent as reinforcement for the 9th Australian Division and the 7th *Fusilier* Brigade.

by Rommel to confer a different trim to the southern formation of the army had begun on the 19th. The XX Corps found itself for the first time with all its divisions under its tactical control. The *Ariete* was in the area northeast of Bab el Qattara with the 8th *Bersaglieri* (V and XI Battalions) aligned front to the east, and the 132nd Tanks (IX, X, and XI Battalions) in the rear with the tanks half buried by explicit AIT order. The *Trieste* held the stretch from Bab el Qattara to Gebel Kalakh. The *Littorio,* whose command had just been assumed by General Becuzzi, was aligned further south with the 12th *Bersaglieri* (XXIII and XXXVI Battalions) and the 133rd Tanks (XII and LI Battalions) gathered in the rear. The German divisions were interposed with the *Menton* Group at Bab el Qattara and the 3rd Recce Group at El Taqa. There were detached elements of the 90th Light further behind; the II and III/361st Infantry at the rear of the *Trieste* and the II/155th Infantry west of El Taqa. Finally, the IV Italian Paratrooper Battalion, that had just arrived, held Naqb Abu Dweiss.

On the other side, the 7th Armoured Division was in place, temporarily reinforced with the 69th Infantry Brigade, with the limited task of engaging the Italo-German forces. On 21 July, at 7:00, it had pushed back a column on the eastern side of El Taqa, driving out the 3rd Recce Group. General Kleemann arranged a counterattack the following morning with the same scout group and a company of *bersaglieri* from the *Littorio*. He also decided to modify the line of the II/155th Infantry.

Now it was necessary to move north. The 9th Australian Division had the 1st Tank Brigade and the 50th *Royal Tanks* as reinforcement, not to mention the fire of the South African artillery. Morshead's plan foresaw three phases. The first was the conquest of Tell Alam el Shaqiq and Tell el Eisa by the 26th Reinforced Brigade, together with the occupation of the positions east of Tell el Makh Khad by the 24th, it too reinforced. Once these objectives were reached, the 9th Australian Cavalry would occupy the space between the two brigades. In the second phase the 50th *Royal Tanks* had to seize Hill 21 of Tell el Makh Khad, immediately supported by the infantry. The third phase concerned the 50th *Royal Tanks* pushing deep into Sanyet el Miteiriya. The 20th Brigade was held in reserve to exploit the success towards El Daba to begin the night of the 23rd.

Undoubtedly, such a plan had little to do with Auchinleck's already mentioned operational design that was based on a second powerful attack supposed to begin a couple of days after the first. It is certain that, on 21 July, Morshead definitely appeared to be vexed when he found out what was awaiting him. That same day he wrote in his diary:

"Two-hour meeting with Ramsden, during which I raised strong objections to the range of my attack planned for tomorrow and some changes in the times. After that, the commander in chief sent for me and a meeting took place at the 30th Corps Headquarters. The meeting was attended by the Commander in Chief, Ramsden and the Assistant Chief of the General Staff (Dorman-Smith), who took notes! The Commander in Chief explained the 13th Corps' plan of attack. And I did not like it because of the wide dispersion of efforts and the support difficulties. I pointed out that our immediate objectives were much more difficult to reach than the army and the army corps thought. The Commander in Chief, according to Ramsden, was very upset and annoyed but did not show it. He emphasized that he intended to deal with a willing commander. I rebutted that my worry was receiving a task for which success was reasonably certain and for which I could receive support and reinforcements and it was also my duty to keep losses to a minimum. In conclusion, the argument ended up becoming a friendly meeting"[100].

According to another version, Auchinleck was instead informed by Ramsden on the 21st in the afternoon, at the 30th Corps Headquarters, that Morshead did not want to execute the action on Miteiriya scheduled for the 24th and, furthermore, intended to report to his own government. Auchinleck was overcome by a violent attack of anger and ordered that Morshead be brought to him immediately, but Ramsden's conciliatory work turned the order into an invitation for tea. At the meeting place, Auchinleck "smoothed" the Australian and promised him the reinforcement of the 69th Infantry Brigade. This discussion and the time necessary to transfer the 69th Brigade forced them to postpone the attack, originally planned for the 24th, to the 26th, according to Dorman-Smith[101].

Obviously, it is not possible to clarify exactly how the events took place. It is certain that the dates in Morshead's diary and those of the other version do not agree, that the Australians attacked on the 22nd according to the above mentioned outline and that the offensive to be launched against Miteiriya on the 26th would have different motives. "*Having failed at the centre*", Auchinleck explained, "*I decided to attack north to assure myself the possession of the Tell el Eisa salient*"[102].

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[100] MAUGHAN B., *op. cit.*, p. 570.

[101] BARNETT C., *op. cit.*, pp. 321-323. See also AA.VV., *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, vol.III, p. 217.

[102] AUCHINLECK C., *Dispatch, cit.*, p. 366.

The artillery preparation of the stretch of front between the sea and Tell el Eisa began at 4:00 on 22 July. An hour later the 26th Australian Brigade advanced north-eastwards, along the coastal road, against the 382nd German Infantry and took control of the small Tell Alam el Shaqiq Hill at 6:30. By order of the AIT Headquarters, worried about a surrender, Navarini organised a counterattack supported by the army's artillery fire, but there was no need for it because an action by the same 382nd Infantry at 7:30 allowed them to reconquer the lost position and throw the adversary back to the departure base.

At 9:00 the 26th Brigade renewed the thrust, trying to wrap around Hill 25 of Tell el Eisa from north, but the attempt ran aground in the course of an hour. And so, in short, the early morning phase had run its course.

The 24th Brigade, reinforced with some tanks, moved at 5:30 with the II/23rd Battalion and a portion of the II/43rd towards Tell el Makh Khad. The struggle had alternating phases and fortune. Although the Australians were able, in the late morning, to file between the German I/361st and the I/155th and to hold their position capturing 60 men from the I/155th, the resistance of units of the 61st Infantry from the *Trento* and the 200th German Infantry was such that it kept the adversary from reaching the El Miteiriya ridge. Part of the ground lost was taken back shortly after the intervention of the Briel Group.

At about midday, one could not say the picture was exactly thrilling in Auchinleck's eyes, but it could be straightened out, even if for Dorman-Smith "*it was clear that the offensive had failed*"[103]. For Rommel, on the contrary, it was barely under control, with the danger of a serious sudden crisis being faced with the persistence of the British offensive that still had two full armoured brigades intact (the 22nd and the 4th). Mancinelli telegraphed the High Command at 13:50:

> "(...) Marshal Rommel considers an imminent new attack from Alam Nayil probable and is seriously worried about possibility of resistance after severe losses this morning. He is most affected by the delayed flow of reinforcements (also German), such that the current crisis does not seem to be moving towards a solution anytime soon. If an enemy attack should be successful in compromising the whole formation, Field Marshal Rommel would be led to promulgate an order to retreat"[104].

In fact, Rommel decided on a serious step to take in the early afternoon. In a meeting held at the AIT Headquarters, he communicated the

[103] AA.VV., *op. cit.*, p. 216.

[104] DSCSAS, telegram 3463 dated 22/7/1942, 13:50 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

decision to Navarini to clear out Hill 23 and 25 of Tell el Eisa and also Hill 21 of Tell el Makh Khad during the night.

In the opposing camp, Ramsden too had called the division commanders to report, but in other spirit. Given that the 24th Brigade was in excellent trim, after a brief consultation with Morshead, he established that the second phase of the initial plan could be considered surpassed and that they could move on to the third. So that at about 20:00 the 24th Brigade and the 50th *Royal Tanks* moved out to reach the El Miteiriya ridge. The beginning appeared promising to Morshead because a battalion of the 361st German Infantry was immediately overcome[105]. But soon the infantry's advance unstuck from that of the tanks and everyone began acting on their own. The tanks arrived on the ridge alone, waiting in vain for the infantry, then pulled back, while the III/62nd and the III/61st Infantry from the *Trento* fiercely resisted the frontal assaults and infiltrations of the Australian Infantry that, disoriented, retreated in the end.

Before midnight, however, the Australians had captured about a hundred men from the 90th Light and five Italians from the *Trento* versus 54 fallen. The 50th *Royal Tanks* had lost 56 tanks and about 20 prisoners on its side. The *Trento*'s losses amounted to about 50 men overall.

While at 19:30 the situation was described by Mancinelli as "*extremely critical*", it triggered a comment of satisfaction two hours later: "*A day, which was certainly hard for the AIT, came to an end, however, with a clear defensive victory*"[106]. Rommel also breathed a sigh of relief. "*In the evening we obtained an undoubted defensive success*", he noted in his diary and, in fact, the 8th Army had lost 1,400 prisoners and 146 tanks[107]. Besides that, Rommel was so satisfied that he expressed a special appreciation of the troops and, in particular, brought his genuine praise of the III/61st Infantry from the *Trento* to the attention of the army[108].

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[105] The 361st German Infantry had flowed from the south the day before.

[106] DSCSAS, telegram 3472 dated 23/7/1942, 10:10 hours by Col. Mancinelli.

[107] The data is that communicated by the AIT Headquarters, which specified that most of the tanks hit could be found within the Italo-German line and so were not recoverable by the British. Liddell Hart provides two different references: in *The Rommel Papers* he comments that the figure is "*approximately correct*", (p. 258) while in *The Tanks* he reduces the number to 118 (p. 207). The German tanks destroyed, and therefore unrecoverable, would have been only three.

[108] The mention in dispatches was as follows: "*I express my special recognition for the III Battalion of the 61st Infantry for its courageous attitude in defence [against] enemy attack sustained by tanks occurring on 22 July in the evening. The Battalion fought brilliantly according to the proved brotherhood in arms with German units and contributed in particular to the great defensive success*". The next day, Rommel personally decorated the commander of the III/61st Infantry with the first class iron cross and distributed 24 iron crosses to other men of the Battalion. This all but isolated episode (Rommel was generous and inclined to reward merits) is cited because in that particular moment of the battle it had beneficial psychological repercussions.

However, Gott had not yet given up on an extreme attempt. At 17:00 he ordered the 5th Indian Division to launch a night attack against Deir el Shein and Hill 63 of Ruweisat. At 2:00 on 23 July the III/14th *Punjab* of the 9th Indian Brigade headed for Hill 63, lost its bearings and turned back in notable confusion. At dawn the *Brescia* saw the enemy Battalion appear in front of its lines without tanks and without artillery preparation. It opened violent fire that took the commander, the assistant major and three company commanders out of combat, crushing any ambition.

The cited message no. 3463 from 13:50 on the 22nd, in which Mancinelli reported Rommel's intention to "*promulgate an order to retreat*" in the case that the British offensive had compromised the formation of the army, hit the High Command like a thunderbolt. The same evening Bastico answered the liaison Italian General Staff:

> "For Marshal Rommel. Situation which appears from communications here received can be tense but does not seem serious. Resistance put up by AIT troops and losses inflicted on the enemy make it seem that new enemy attempt can also be faced and overcome even if some fluctuations in the line occur. In any case general retreat would be in conflict with precise Supreme Command order to resist at all costs on the current line and could bring about enormous irreparable losses for our units, especially for the infantry and the equipment.
> I remind you that, besides the units that have already arrived, two infantry battalions, numerous tanks and about seven Italian artillery groups are on their way or will be in the next few days in addition to the German units. Our air force is very efficient. Reinforcements from the homeland that are quite significant on the whole have already started to flow into Tobruk and Matruh.
> I am sure that, with his valour and perseverance, Marshal Rommel will be able to overcome the temporary crisis"[109].

Then, in turn, Bastico communicated, again "*for Marshal Rommel*", the complete agreement of the Supreme Command about what he had written, assuring every effort on behalf of the same Supreme Command to speed up the sending of reinforcements. He also added that "*Duce wants me to recommend you should avoid any wearing of the troops with the greatest care*"[110]. The whole thing was suggested by Cavallero, who had

[109] DSCSAS, telegram 01/13500/Op. dated 22/7/1942, 19:15 hours.
[110] DSCSAS, telegram 01/13512/Op. dated 22/7/1942, 23:50 hours.

been in Cirenaica for a few days and, on that 22nd, had delivered to Bastico the general orders for the operations towards Egypt, which gave a more official shape to what Mussolini had written in his note on 19 July[111].

On the 23rd Mancinelli reported briefly on the meeting had with Rommel. Above all, he clarified that Rommel was firmly committed to keeping the El Alamein line whatever the price in effort, but confirmed that, in the case of a serious and concrete British success, the commander of the AIT would adopt measures that could range from a simple conversion of the front to an orderly retreat. It should not be ignored that the favourable outcome of the battle on the 22nd was "*one hundred percent due to the valorous attitude of the troops engaged. A surrender of small portions of these troops would have been enough to overturn the situation*"[112].

In the afternoon Mancinelli went back to writing, anticipating Rommel's official answer. In short, the AIT was extremely worn and, even if it had inflicted heavy losses on the adversary, the difference in the flow of supplies (200,000 tons reported to be arriving at the Suez Canal versus the Italo-German scarce supplies) was worrying. All things considered, one could not rule out the dilemma of letting oneself be destroyed in place or opportunely escaping the danger.

> "It seems undoubted to Marshal Rommel", continued Mancinelli, "that, in such an event, only the second solution is to be taken into consideration. And that the relative decision can be made at the right moment, should the unfortunate event come to be, only by the said commander of the army.
> Marshal Rommel has informed his own Supreme Command in an analogous way.
> As I have repeated more than once, a tendency for "retreat" should not be deduced from Marshal Rommel's attitude. On the contrary, it is certain that he will do all that is possible to maintain possession of the achieved positions. His actions as commander in the past few days constitutes the best confirmation of this assertion.
> Only in an extreme case, to avoid a major disaster, could he be led to order a retreat. And it is evident that, to conduct this operation with some probability of success, this needs to be studied preventively (...)"[113].

[111] 149 Infantry Sec. dated 22/7/1942.
[112] DSCSAS, telegram 3470 dated 23/7/1942, 9:50 hours by Col. Mancinelli.
[113] DSCSAS, ph. 3478 dated 23/7/1942.

Rommel's letter personally addressed to Bastico was rather dry and haughty but realistic:

"Contrary to the point of view held by Your Excellency in the cited paper, I am of the opinion that the situation at the Alamein front has been extraordinarily critical for ten days and, despite yesterday's victorious defence, it will remain critical until the expected reinforcements have reached the troops, the front has not been garrisoned by the greatest forces, the organisation of the passive defence has not been completed and the mobile forces have not been rallied in the rear area to be ready to conduct a mobile defence.

What the real situation is can only be judged here at the front, observing in person. Over the last few days the enemy, who possesses a strong superiority in terms of tanks and infantry, has repeatedly completed deep irruptions in the front garrisoned by feeble forces *[sehr dünn]* that were only contained laboriously by an extreme contribution of extreme energies by already heavily worn troops. In such conditions, as a result of the intense concentrated artillery fire, the attacks of armoured forces and of the infantry and the continuous air raids, the loss of German troops has been very heavy. The recently *flowed forces* have been completely absorbed by the losses of the last six days. It can be noted with certainty that the *British offensive that has now begun will continue*.

If the enemy, by virtue of its forces superior in all weapons, is able to break through the scarcely garrisoned front, I shall find myself having to *decide* whether:

a. to continue the struggle to the last cartridge in the area of the El Alamein positions that are still holding out, but leaving the enemy to advance westwards, given there are no other forces to stop him;

b. or abandon the El Alamein positions, resisting further behind the breakthrough with the mobile forces gathered, attacking the enemy that has broken through, pulling back gradually to retreated positions closer to the supply bases and thus saving Northern Africa.

I feel the latter is the only possible solution and kindly ask Your Excellency to express your point of view in these regards"[114].

[114] DSCSAS, ph. 8242/Sec. dated 23/7/1942, 19:00 hours by ACIT. Rommel was not aware of it, but if between 17 and 23 July a remarkable pessimism tortured his soul, the atmosphere in Cairo certainly was not better. In fact on the 22nd General Corbett, the Chief of Staff, issued the operation order no. 134, which repealed preceding directives, *"for the improbable case in which the enemy is strong enough to launch a large scale offensive against the 8th Army before it can take the initiative"* and listed a long series of defensive measures to take to defend the Delta. (C. AUCHINLECK, *Dispatch* cit., pp. 393-395)

Faced with this perspective, Bastico could not but send the letter to Cavallero, who had gone back to Rome on the 23rd, saying that he agreed with Rommel, but having received orders from the Duce excluding *a priori* any retreat from El Alamein, awaited the approval from the Supreme Command before giving a reply.

As for Rommel, he called De Stefanis and communicated to him that "*it was necessary to study the retreat to positions further back, west of Deir el Murra* [that is about ten kilometres west of Tell Aqqaqir!] *in case the enemy is able to break through the front of our formation*"[115].

Then, Cavallero's reply was literally enough to leave Bastico speechless:

> "As you well know, your 13500[116], compiled for your initiative and approved by our 157[117], had as its aim to react against the momentary state of low morale that seemed to be appearing in the Armoured Corps Command.
> Supreme Command's orders are specified in document 149[118], which is also previous to the cited telegram 157. Many days have passed in the meantime and Armoured Corps front is gradually consolidating.
> However, it is obvious that, in the case of wide-ranging unforeseen events, on site headquarters must take new instructions. It is also clear that, to use the expressions in Rommel's telegram, loss of Northern Africa can in no way be contemplated"[119].

Perhaps it is hypercritical, but this seems the concrete application of the characteristics that some witty fellow attributed to the following *order*: "*If it is well written, it must exclusively commit the recipient*". Bastico responded on the 28th, commenting on the various points of document 149 and highlighting the serious difficulties of a logistic nature and the lack of personnel and units. What clearly resulted from both shortcomings was already well known by the Supreme Command: "*It is of extreme urgency, above all in relation to the front, to have the means brought into Northern Africa, the necessity of which I have already made known*"[120].

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[115] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps, dated 24/7/1942.

[116] Bastico's letter to Rommel from 25 July, reported previously, in which it highlights that a general retreat would be in conflict with the precise orders of the Supreme Command.

[117] Cavallero's letter, 22 July, of full agreement with what Bastico had written and in which he recommends avoiding "any wearing down".

[118] General orders issued on 22/7/1942.

[119] DSCS, ph. 31740/Op. dated 28/7/1942.

[120] DSCSAS, ph. 01/13926/Op. dated 28/7/1942.

5. The Battle for El Miteiriya (27 July)

The second phase of the British plan left Dorman-Smith worried, convinced that at that point the adversary would have had time to reorganise and prepare for a new hit. Rommel's idea of alternating Italian and German units was known and, above all, a message of the *Fliegerführer Afrika* was decoded on 25 July which showed that the AIT expected another attack[121]. Also if they tried to make Rommel believe that the attack would occur much further south, there did not seem to be much hope of succeeding. But Auchinleck looked at the matter on a wider scale, also considering that on the 24th Rostov had fallen and the Germans were heading for Caucasus.

Auchinleck's thoughts are shown clearly in a long personal letter sent to the Imperial Chief of Staff on the 25th with all the right evaluations, considerations, convictions and uncertainties. He admits to having taken back some local initiative with difficulty, but to having blocked the persistent Italo-German attempts to attack the El Alamein front from southwest. The strategy of acting essentially against the Italian Infantries had had good results because the Germans were forced to move into the Tell el Eisa and Ruweisat sectors due to serious Italian losses. However,

> "I am very disappointed that our great effort on 21-22 July came to nothing concrete, because I put a great deal of hope into it. I still do not know the complete course of the battle in the central sector, but it seems that the 23rd Armoured Brigade, though efficient enough, lost control and went in the wrong direction. Furthermore, it seems the infantry committed some errors that could have been avoided".

All in all - Auchinleck continued - though inflicting heavy losses on the enemy, our aim, that is the breakthrough of the front, was not attained. The 9th Australian had achieved some successes north gaining greater depth, but the 7th Armoured Division's action south, which was even reinforced with the 69th Infantry Brigade, had been disappointing. Even if convinced of the overall meagre makeup of the AIT's southern sector, for the moment he nurtured little hope of carrying out something profitable. Apart from that,

> "The enemy now has the German infantry, without any regard for its organic ties, mixed with the rest of the Italian divisions on the whole

[121] HINSLEY F.H., *op. cit.*, p. 406.

front, so we can no longer push against the Italians and put them in the sack as we have done previously. However, we are looking for a weak point and I hope we will soon find one. I think that, due to the great extension of its line, the enemy is not able to confer much depth to its positions, except for the centre, where it is keeping German tanks in reserve. The Italian armoured divisions are at the rear of the southern sector. The doubt is if I really have the reserves available to be able to organise new attacks or to vigorously sustain an offensive, once it has been launched (...)".

Then he went on to consider the organisation of the command. This passage also needs to be reported in its entirety, as it is very instructive in its serene and objective detachment with which it faces such a delicate matter:

"The 8th Army", Auchinleck wrote, "will need a commander again sometime in the days to come, I think, but I propose to stay here until the conclusion of the present battle. I think I need to bring it to a close and I absolutely want to, even if it is not very easy to occupy a double post. In any case, Corbett is doing very well in Cairo and I only deal with the main political aspects, although there are few of them, as you can imagine.

I believe Gott is capable of commanding the 8th Army well; up until now I have been able to ascertain that he does not show signs of fatigue and everyday I see how he manages large formations. Yet he has been in the Desert a long time and could, therefore, go to the 9th Army in Syria, where it is thought he would be ready to command an army. He has made a favourable impression on me in every circumstance.

I think that, once Wilson has finished his investigation, he might leave, as admirable as he has been in the treatment of the problems in Syria and has not demonstrated symptoms of fatigue. Therefore, for the 8th Army, we would want a commander from the homeland or from India. He must be an energetic man and with striking personality and have a very versatile and receptive mind. He must also be young, in every sense, in body and spirit, and prepared to accept advice and learn, unless he already has previous experience in the Western Desert (...).

I have decided to replace Whiteley as Chief of Staff of the 8th Army with Guingand. He absolutely needs a change and I hope you will find him a little place in the area of operational planning, a sector to which he is particularly well-suited. I do not believe he is cut out for an elevated

post in the General Staff of a large complex unit, even if he is a first-rate element for the sort of posts in very high level Headquarters. In my opinion, he deserves a promotion to major general and I hope you will suggest him for such an advancement. He certainly deserves it, as his record of service from the last two years demonstrates.
Ramsden is doing well at the Headquarters of the 30th Corps and he, Gott and I work excellently together and in full harmony. I have Dorman-Smith who helps me here and I find him of great value. Messervy was taking his place as Assistant Chief of Staff (to the Commander in Chief), but now he is far away, in India, preparing and training an armoured division (...)".

Regarding the operational problem Auchinleck assured that he would make an extreme attempt to avert the heavy threat weighing on Egypt, but worried about creating false illusions for a rapid decision: "*I believe that last month we were close*", he added, "*but the scales are absolutely balanced and on 1 July I myself could not have bet on being able to resist on the current positions for more than a few days*". At that point, the army's training was significantly better and the hypothesis, theoretically possible, of having to undergo another retreat seemed improbable. The defence system enacted was based on a strong resistance position organised at a depth of more than thirty miles, composed of strongholds in echelons and artillery positions, such that it would be able to intervene in any area of irruption. In particular, the strongholds were held by a minimum of infantry with some battery groups, while the bulk of the artillery, defended by portions of mobile infantry, remained free for a massive fire manoeuvre where necessary. Furthermore, at the rear of the El Alamein defensive position, there were the preparations at the *uadi* Natrun and on the Delta. "*Whatever happens*", he repeated, "*I want to preserve the 8th Army or most of it as a mobile field force*".

In conclusion, Auchinleck went on to the strategic aspects which he knew were in serious dispute in London. On 18 July Roosevelt had sent Hopkins, General Marshall and Admiral King to Great Britain as his personal representatives to discuss and concretise with Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff the definite plans for the second half of 1942 and the provisional ones for 1943. It is obvious that Operation *Sledgehammer* (aiming at opening a second front in Europe) constituted the principle matter for discussion, but the Middle East was in second place.

A paragraph of the instructions written by Roosevelt for his envoys said that the Middle East had to be held in the firmest way possible, regardless

of whether Russia would give way or would resist. The fall of the African front would mean, in succession, the loss of Egypt and the Suez Canal, the loss of Syria, the loss of Mossul's oil wells, the loss of the Persian Gulf and all of its oil fields, the joining of German and Japanese forces, and possibly the loss of the Indian Ocean, the probable German occupation of French North Africa and the interruption of the trade routes supported by the intermediate ports of call in Western Africa, serious danger for all Atlantic navigation and even for the eastern coast of Brazil, the use of Spain and Portugal and their own colonies by Germany. That said, the matter was deciding on the most opportune means for defending the Middle East, that is to say sending air and ground reinforcements and/or a new operation in Morocco or Algeria to take Rommel's army from behind[122].

Churchill had extremely clear ideas: no intention at all of committing himself in Europe in 1942; absolute will to resolve the Middle East question. After many meetings he got his own way: the *Sledgehammer* plan would be set aside and *Gymnast* (landing in French North Africa) would take its place. Then, because the variants of the latter could generate confusion, Churchill re-baptised the project *Torch*, widening it to also include landings in Algeria.

Auchinleck obviously was not aware of all this, nor did he know that Brooke was able to stop, with some difficulty, a telegram from Churchill that incited new offensives. However, he had something to say:

> "With regards to this request for a "second front", we think that you already have a "second front" here whose importance should not be overlooked! Should it become necessary to establish a "second front" in Europe, North Africa and the entire Mediterranean basin are, as I see things, really Europe on the strategic level and inseparable from it. Wouldn't it be a good thing to make this understood publicly? (...)"[123].

On 25 July, according to the British intelligence services, the Italian troops were holding the left of the Tell el Eisa sector and, more precisely, the *Trieste* was believed to be west and southwest of the relief (actually, there was the 164th German Infantry Division instead) and the *Trento* west of El Miteiriya[124]. On the whole 9,100 men, 70 field guns and heavy field artillery and 45 anti-tank, 15 armoured cars and about a dozen tanks were

[122] CHURCHILL W., *op. cit.*, p. 46.
[123] CONNEL J., *op. cit.*, pp. 677-680.
[124] MAUGHIN B., *op. cit.*, p. 590.

calculated. On the right side, the German troops detected were two battalions of the 382nd Infantry, the Kiehl group, the 33rd Scout Group, two battalions of the 361st Infantry, the Briel Group and the 200th Infantry for a total of 3,600 men, 106-120 guns and between 26 and 29 88 mm guns. In short, apart from the *Trieste* at that point moved to the southern sector, the understood mingling of the Axis units probably was not understood in its entirety (Sketch N. 19).

The plan foresaw the 24th Australian Brigade, supported by the 50th *Royal Tanks*, taking control of the El Miteiriya ridge from northeast, while the 69th British Brigade would reach the track to Naqb Abu Dweiss from east some kilometres south of the above mentioned ridge. The 2nd Armoured Brigade and the 4th Armoured Brigade had to break in through the breach to exploit the success. They would have left their respective emplacements south of Ruweisat to come to the gathering zone southeast of the El Alamein entrenched field. Auchinleck issued a special order of the day of encouragement for the 8th Army. It ended with a vigorous "*Stick to it*".

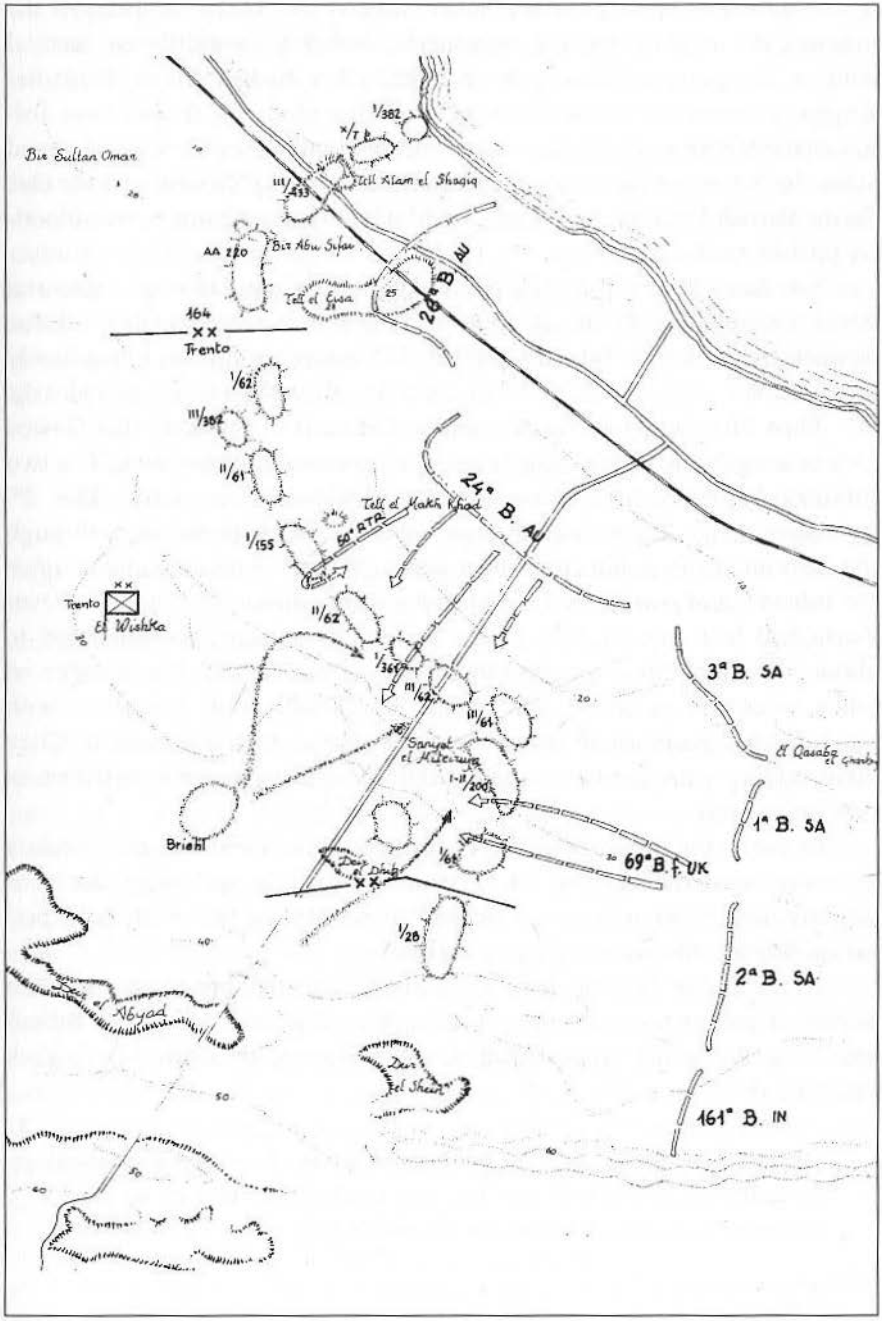
At midnight on 26 July the 24th Australian Brigade started to advance along the track to Naqb Abu Dweiss. After about an hour it came under the intense halting fire of the three battalions blocking the direction of attack: the II/62nd Infantry from the *Trento*, the I/361st German Infantry and the III/62nd Infantry. The struggle was fierce and, at the end of a ruthless resistance lasting more than an hour, the I/361st was overcome, losing 115 prisoners.

So the corridor was opened and the Australians went further on, although hindered at the flank by the fire of the two battalions of the 62nd Infantry. At 2:00 the enemy occupied Sanyet el Mitreiriya; moreover, the intervention of the Briel Groups was able to eliminate the penetration and block the leak.

The 69th British Brigade moved out eastwards, directed towards the extreme right of the *Trento* and precisely at the stretch held by the I and II/200th German Infantry and the I/61st Infantry, also involving the I/28th Infantry on the extreme left of the XX Corps. Here the progression was much slower because the incomplete de-mining immediately put the VI *Durham Light* Infantry, the battalion at the head of the brigade, into great difficulty.

As much as the 69th advanced, at that point in significant disorder, the pressure remained strong. Part of the I/200th Infantry and a company of the I/61st Infantry were overcome, while the IV/46th Artillery from the *Trento*, finding itself close to the British vanguards, started shooting point-blank. The intervention of the mobile reserves was also able to restore the situation in this zone at about 6:30.

Sketch N. 19
"THE FIGHT AT EL MITEIRIYA (27 JULY)"



However, at 7:00 the Australians and British renewed their attempts against the strongholds held by the II/62nd, III/62nd and III/61st Infantries. It was a useless effort as it was made vain by the heavy weapons of the infantry, the artillery and the minefields. Probably, in a different tactical context, things would have gone differently but, luckily for us, Brigadier Briggs, commander of the 2nd Armoured Brigade, who should have followed the 69th Brigade, did not dare venture blind into unrecognised mined areas, or better yet file into corridors considered insufficiently fit for use. So the British Infantry, left alone and blinded by a sand storm, was bloodily pushed back.

Just later, at about 10:00, it was the Australians' turn to cease and desist, although the 50th *Royal Tanks* tried to intervene to help them. It was stopped by the I/115th Infantry and the 33rd Scout Group and immediately lost 22 tanks, while the II/28th Australian Battalion looked on speechlessly.

Then Morshead took an account on the basis of the news that flowed to him irregularly due to disturbances in the radio transmissions. The two infantry brigades had exhausted their offensive capacity. The 2nd Armoured Brigade was hesitating in view of one of its corridors through the Australians lines, but ended up asserting that it would only move *"after the infantry had guaranteed the clearing of the mines"*[125]. The 50th *Royal Tanks* had had enough. The losses for the 24th Australian amounted to about 400 men, those for the 69th British to about 600. The number of tanks taken out of battle was about 30. At that point Ramsden, with Auchinleck's permission, decided to put an end to the operation. They were dealing with another complete failure. A pause to think it over was now necessary.

In the southern sector of the front the relative calm was only broken by some sporadic activity of mechanised patrols and brief duels of artillery, which did not prevent the AIT from working feverishly to organise its defense and from laying minefields.

At the end of July, the first battle of El Alamein came to an end and a period of global reorganisation without the harassing thought of British attacks could finally begin. After the war, Bayerlein said to his English interviewer:

> "We were deeply affected and seriously vexed by the way you attacked us for the entire month of July. You very nearly broke through our lines, and more than once, between the 10 and 16 July. If you had been able

[125] *Ibid.*, p. 594.

to persist in the attack for another couple of days, you certainly would have been successful.
The 26th of July was the decisive day. We were left without munitions for heavy artillery and Rommel had decided to retreat to the border line if your attack had been renewed"[126].

General Warlimont from the OKW arrived at the front on the 26th. He did not bring specific orders, but limited himself to highlighting the importance of remaining on the El Alamein positions, in sight of the imminent invasion of Persia, through Caucasus, by von Klaust's army. However, Rommel requested a meeting with Barbasetti the next day. As he was unable to travel because of a gastric indisposition, Bastico arrived at El Daba on the 29th and Rommel accompanied him during an inspection of the frontline.

"Along the track, from stronghold to stronghold", the high commander remembered later, "he pointed out the course of the line with a perfect knowledge of the terrain and the men who manned the positions. I was convinced of finding him disheartened or irritated. I was wrong. He was serene and every so often he brought to mind the idea of those distant objectives of which he had spoken with enthusiasm, just after taking Tobruk. The arrival of reinforcements had transformed him"[127].

According to the long letter that he sent to Cavallero upon returning to the High Command, the AIT's formation was relatively weak in the north for a series of different reasons, such as the course of the line, the extremely modest tactical holds offered by the terrain, the ease of movement for the armoured units, the mediocre possibilities for observation from a distance. In the centre it appeared sufficiently robust, especially in relation to the Qaret el Abd and Bab el Qattara positions where the enemy had conducted work of some significance. In the south it was quite strong, thanks to the natural features that allowed for a defence with limited forces, and to the work done in the past by the British at Naqb Abu Dweiss and El Taqa. The defensive system implemented in these areas also included emplacements, little reserves and large shelters of about forty or more premises with high ceilings, wide hallways and spacious rooms.

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[126] YOUNG, Desmond, *Rommel*, Milan, Longanesi, pp. 225-226.

[127] Weekly *Tempo*, n. 51, from 16/12/1958, cited article, pp. 30-35. It should be pointed out that half of the 164th German (ternary) Division had flowed into the sector of the XXI Corps on the 28th.

The entire line was determined by a series of strongholds prepared according to the criteria ordered by Rommel since the middle of July[128], but, apart from the width of the intervals, their garrison was too limited and their arrangement far from complete. Consequently, there could be a wide possibility for adversary infiltration with dangerous effect. It was Rommel's intention to establish a wide band of mines along the entire front and, in a second moment, an additional band of mines at the rear of the first rate strongholds; but although he had never given his opinion about the time required for such a project, it was a job that would take a number of weeks to be completed.

When Bastico expressed his hesitation in these regards, Rommel had naturally rebutted that the rapidity with which it could be completed depended on the possibility of providing materials to the workforce. To which, Bastico replied, just as naturally, that it was as always a question of transport, the unhappy situation of which was by then known to all.

Bastico then went on to talk about the Italian units in his report. The commanders of the army corps had repeated the painful notes already pointed out to the Supreme Command more than once: the necessity for perfectly trained and solidly organised reserves; the advantages of rotating officers of the General Staff, given that not just a few of the present absolutely needed substitution; the troops' fatigue which was, predictably, greater everyday; the impelling necessity for vehicles that was becoming "*exponentially*" accentuated due to the losses for motives of war; the wear caused by the frightening state of the tracks and the lack of spare parts.

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[128] The strongholds had to be established at the battalion level and structured in minor company strongholds (that however, at least the Italian ones, did not possess the necessary means for an autonomous defence, nor adequate reinforcements).

Each battalion stronghold was surrounded by an external barbed wire fence, behind which you found the minefields covered by machine-gun foxholes. For lack of camouflage materials and to trick the enemy, phoney emplacements were built.

The characteristics of the strongholds translated into the following data:

Front of company stronghold: 700-800 m.

Depth of stronghold: about 300 m.

Gaps between company strongholds: 400-500 m.

Width of a battalion sector: up to 3,500 m.

The artilleries had to be drawn up so as to be able to intervene in front of the forward strongholds. In some cases the group was placed on the inside of the battalion stronghold; in other cases it went to a formation of artillery strongholds behind the forwards structures and at varying distances, so as to preserve the possibility of isolated or mass intervention, according to the objectives to defeat in the sector of interest.

We shall return to such a defensive concept; for the moment it is sufficient to say that for the infantry strongholds it was difficult for the prescriptions to be achieved in practice and for the artilleries the firing manoeuvre was made difficult due to the width of the sectors, the range limitations and the insufficient signal and observation nets.

The matter of the means of transport was at the centre of every commander's worry, especially if they considered the hypothesis of a retreat to be taken under enemy pressure, in which case they would have been faced with *"losses of exceptional seriousness"*.

As for the morale of the soldiers, all things considered, it could be defined as high despite the hardships, *"but it could be much higher if all the officers in their direct contact, lieutenants and captains, were at the height of their task"*. A notable fatigue also surfaced among the commanders of larger formations, and numerous substitutions were enacted. In the XX Corps, General Adolfo Infante took the place of General Arena at the *Ariete* Tank Division, General Carlo Ceriana Mayneri that of General Becuzzi at the *Littorio* Armoured Division, and General Francesco La Ferla was about to take the *Trieste* Motor Division from General Azzi. The X Corps also had movements underway: General Dino Parri in place of General Lombardi at the *Brescia* Infantry Division, who had already gone back to Italy seriously wounded, while substitutes were arriving for General Gioda, commander of the army corps, and General Torriano, commander of the *Pavia*.

At the level of operational forecasts:

> "Speaking of the future situation, Marshal Rommel", Bastico wrote, "brought to my attention that, as far as he knows, the British will definitely be receiving significant reinforcements between the end of August and the beginning of September, thus having a strong superiority in infantry, artillery, armoured vehicles, and also aviation over our forces for that period of time. Consequently, our offensive should be launched before they reach this superiority; but considering how the struggle will be tough, it is absolutely necessary that remarkable reinforcements reach him before the 20th.
> Essentially, he considers the current situation with tempered optimism and the future one with a manifest sense of reality: but the fact that he does not hide the difficulties from himself will put him in conditions to confront them and overcome them with his usual energy"[129].

With this letter, Bastico simultaneously sent another to the Headquarters of the army corps, in a completely different tone. As it has been said, the situation with vehicles was distressing, nevertheless the movement beyond the border, having occurred in particularly favourable strategic circumstances, was only partially completed in a fragmentary and

[129] DSCSAS, ph. 01/15035 Op. dated 31/7/1942.

inorganic way due to the deficiencies in the realm of transport. According to the superior commander, a notable carelessness in the logistic sector also resulted from hasty examination:

> "The auto-transport of the units", he stated, "was executed without taking into due consideration the organic ties and good organisation (...). In general, everything that constituted an impediment or a worry or *simply a difficulty to be resolved* was left behind and, to resolve the difficulty, the help of the High Command was invoked before trying to exploit their own possibilities (...).

It is not possible to evaluate correctness of these remarks, but the responsibility of the units seems a bit too accentuated. It may be useful to remember that the divisions, regiments, battalions were immediately thrown into Egypt after the conquest of Tobruk. However, the continuation in the following circular was surely founded:

> "The so-called bases have grown excessively for all of the units, including the minor ones. Army corps, divisions, regiments and also units inferior to a regiment have created one or more *rear bases* and *forward bases* scattered between Tmimi and El Daba. In each of them, sometimes they left in disorder entire units, isolated men in remarkable quantities, vehicles and materials of every sort".

And the following was particularly tough:

> "Also on other occasions, I was required to severely draw the attention of the General Staffs of the large units to a more circumspect organisation and a more functional working of the services. But if I have to make deductions from the repeated SOS's that are still addressed to the High Command in matters strictly regarding the General Staffs of the large units themselves, I must unfortunately recognise that the latter are not yet up to their task"[130].

It should be said that Bastico's intervention, especially after his visit to the army corps, had good results and the most visible deficiencies were eliminated (also thanks to the period of operational calm).

The Italian Navy Chief of Staff, Riccardi, also went to North Africa to make a personal assessment of the conditions of the ports. At the end of

[130] DSCSAS, ph. 01/13975 Op. dated 30/7/1942.

the inspection, he prepared a report for the Supreme Command, highlighting the state of things.

In his opinion, Bengasi was still the port to direct the ships of greatest tonnage to, to then sort them out, one at a time, at Tobruk. There they could send smaller steamers, while for Marsa Matruh and eventually Dern, Bardia and Sollum only sailing ships and motorised rafts could be utilised[131].

With the increase of anti-air and anti-ship defences, the completion of works in the ports and the assignment of the landing craft, the mass would be moved to Tobruk little by little, while some steamers of modest tonnage would be sent to Marsa Matruh. Obviously, only the traffic necessary for Tripolitania had to go to Tripoli. Calculated as a volume of 100,000 tons of monthly supplies and adding another 20,000 tons of materials to unload from the larger ships and load onto coasting vessels, the distribution of port movement had to be the following:

Tripoli	20,000 tons
Bengasi	45,000 tons
Tobruk	30,000 tons
Marsa Matruh	12,000 tons
Derna, Ras Ilal, Sollum, Bardia	13,000 tons

The 60 motorized rafts provided would essentially assure the traffic beyond Tobruk and, while awaiting more appropriate means, provide for the port work of Bengasi and Tobruk by a measure of three or four units each. According to a very approximte calculation, if one wanted to guarantee the daily arrival of four motor-rafts at Marsa Matruh, it was necessary to convert 32 rafts to the task, as the journey cycle including necessary maintenance was not typically believed to be less than eight days (four for the transfer, the loading and unloading, and four as reserve for maintenance and inevitable stops due to bad weather). As a consequence, only about twenty of the motor-rafts would be left for possible coasting vessels from Bengasi: very few.

A noticeable improvement could only be obtained by getting to full efficiency the railway built by the British extending from Marmarica up to

[131] The wharf had been completely destroyed in Bardia and Sollum. While in the former the restoration was not considered a priority (in favour of other projects) because it was very long and because the motor rafts were able to land without a pier, in Sollum the work was underway and was predicted to be completed by the first part of August. However, the motor rafts had no difficulty docking here either.

Marsa Matruh was controlled by Admiral Weichold with German personnel and there were already sufficient piers and quays to unload 300 tons a day.

Tobruk. So the traffic east of Tobruk would be assured by the railway and the auxiliary traffic by the motor-rafts, which would become the main means for the cabotage from Bengasi.

In these regards it was, however, necessary to keep in mind the experience of the Germans. The most feared enemy of the Mas and the motor-rafts was the aircraft and, since it was not always possible to count on the protection of the fighters, it was necessary to strengthen anti-aircraft defence on the boats in question.

Riccardi also made a detailed analysis of the ports and of Tobruk first of all, the roadstead that required the greatest effort at that time. Despite the continuous nocturnal pounding from the air, in the last fifteen days the average daily unloading was around 1,250 tons and that of loading about 160 tons. However, the time at rest of the ships in the roadstead was alarming and unacceptable (some even stayed *over a month* as in the case of the German steamer *Menes*). Therefore orders were imparted to avoid the presence of more than five steamers at Tobruk, of which one large, to make unloading possible in no more than five or six days.

Apart from the Italian Navy's competence in the unloading of materials, it was absolutely necessary to provide for a large increase of land transport vehicles to prevent the already worrying accumulation on the docks. In other words, at least 75 vehicles a day were required as opposed to the current 40. With an extension of the railway to the port (also foreseeable in *two months'* time), the need for vehicles would be reduced.

As a matter of fact, the Egyptian railway reaching a head at Matruh and brought by the British to Sidi Rezegh (30 kilometres from Tobruk) allowed a real advantage. The first train, driven by a locomotive obtained from repaired war spoils, had been activated on 24 July. On 31 July, the availability of Italian locomotives reached about twenty and allowed a daily traffic of about 300 tons between Sidi Rezegh and El Daba. Behind the lines, unfortunately, nothing managed to get done. The Zuara-Tripoli-Tagiura and Bengasi-Barce sections were of secondary importance both for the shortness of their course and their potential. The idea of extending the Tripoli-Tagiura at least to Sirte and the Bengasi-Barte to Tobruk remained a dream, despite the fact that the Germans were also interested in the matter. It is clear that the insufficient materials disastrously encumbered a solution to the problem. Yet it is not possible to put aside doubts about the lack of a clear will to implement things supported by an energetic organising capacity. This, let's be clear, was apart from the deficient strategic vision in the Libyan theatre of operations, not just during all of the Thirties but even during the "peacetime!".

Chapter three

THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

1. The Passing of the Initiative to the British Camp

The fighting in July had stopped Rommel's run and worn out the Italo-German Army, but the 8th Army was also exhausted.

On 27 July, at 14:45, Auchinleck signed an assessment of the situation prepared by General Dorman-Smith. The document, wilfully ignored by Churchill and Montgomery, constitutes an accurate analysis of the operational problem of the 8th Army, forecasts the date and Rommel's manoeuvre plan for the battle of Alam el Halfa, indicates the conditions for making the Italo-German offensive fail and, finally, suggests criteria on which to place the subsequent British offensive, i.e. breakthrough in the El Alamein sector[1].

In synthesis, a comparison of the opposing forces shows that it would have been very difficult for Rommel to achieve the troop superiority necessary to make an initiative in a short time:

> "The supposed force ratio does not justify a German offensive in the month of August, as long as we are not committing any serious mistake that leaves an open gap. The enemy, nevertheless, can reinforce itself in the second half of August, although there is no confirmation about such a plan. On the other hand, the Axis may perform great efforts to reinforce the *Panzerarmee* in the shortest time possible".

As for armoured vehicles, the 8th Army was equipped with about sixty efficient tanks and in the first weeks of August it would receive others, after which, nothing until September. The DAK, on the other hand, would probably have put 150-200 *Panzers* into line by August (the Italian M14s were omitted from the comparison). On the other hand, the British air superiority was absolute and constituted a *"very considerable asset"*.

Having considered the logistic factors, the characteristics of the front and the positions on which the two armies were deployed, the respective possibilities boiled down to very few. The 8th Army could continue with

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[1] AUCHINLECK C., *Despatch* cit. app. 21, p. 395 and following and C. BARNETT, *op. cit.*, app. B, p. 457 and following.

more or less local actions in the hope of provoking an Italo-German breakdown before the arrival of reinforcements, even though the attempts carried out in the northern and central sectors had failed for various reasons, such as incomplete training, and nothing invited trying again, given the defensive consolidation that the enemy had achieved. In the south, the attempt was mainly a diversionary attack. Since the enemy deployed there appeared weak, a violent and sudden attack with the British mechanised troops might be able to break the bottleneck at El Alamein. However, the only unit available was the weak New Zealand Division with insufficient artillery support. In the end, the probability for success oscillated between 40 and 60% and a failure would have completely wiped out the New Zealanders. So, an offensive attitude did not seem advisable.

The alternative was to stay on the defence

> "(...) until we are strong enough to attack, something that, unless the enemy's situation gets worse, will not happen until the middle of September at the earliest. The obvious objection is that that leaves the initiative to the enemy, if they are in a position to avail themselves of it. (However,) it's very doubtful that they can take the initiative with any chance for success until the end of August. We actually have a good chance of seriously defeating them if they attack before in the El Alamein-El Hammam zone (about 50 kilometres east of El Alamein) because we have a reserve on hand that includes at least a hundred *Grant* tanks. Moreover, the critical period of preparation for the defence of the Delta and Cairo has been completed at this point. It would be rather implausible for the enemy to contemplate wrapping around the 8th Army on currently occupied land.
> There could be a difficult moment at the end of August before the new divisions are ready, (two armoured and two infantry) but this could be avoided by preparing their artillery combat groups before the rest of the divisions and thus reinforcing the 8th Army (this plan requires further examination)...".

As for the adversary:

> "(...) they have to resume the offensive without a doubt, but it is improbable that they can do so before the middle of August and, even then, it does not look as if they can possess a true margin of superiority, except for the armoured troops. They will certainly try to attack before the end of August and, since the defences of the 8th Army keep gaining in

strength and depth, they will be more tempted than ever to avoid them and try to succeed through manoeuvring. This could lead them into serious difficulties in the desert, in the places where the sand is soft.
As an alternative, they could adopt a defensive strategy, given that our forces are too solid and too well organised to attack. If they choose this solution, they can preserve the (current) positions or retreat to an intermediate line that protects Matruh, which could also result into an advantage for us because they would still be in range when we are in a position to attack. If they then retreated to the Egyptian border, it would be evaluated at that time whether or not to let them go undisturbed".

Definitely, the best line of conduct appeared to be defensive, with random thrusts, leading Rommel to attack prematurely, in the second ten days of August. In particular, the 8th Army could wait for the Italo-German action south of Bab el Qattara that would flow in an enveloping manoeuvre of the southern British flank. From this derived the necessity for a sturdy "*mobile wing*" based on the 7th Armoured Division. Dorman-Smith summarised it like so:

"The enemy currently garrisons a front with forces sufficient to the aim and from which they cannot be dislodged with any manoeuvre or attack the 8th Army is in a position to launch at this time. We are strongly organised for a defensive battle. The enemy is trying to put their forces back in order and resume the offensive towards Egypt. The 8th Army needs new vehicles and training before being ready for offensive operations.
It is foreseeable that we and the enemy will firmly dig into our positions during the month of August; therefore, the success of an action is improbable for both parties. If the air and land situation does not change, the 8th Army will receive two armoured divisions and two infantry divisions as reinforcement about mid-September. This can assure us sufficient superiority to justify an attack (...). The long range plan is to train the newly arrived divisions for a counteroffensive that can hopefully begin in the second half of September".

Three days later, Auchinleck summoned Lieutenant General Corbett and the army corps commanders to report from Cairo. After having illustrated and commented on the matters set forth in Dorman-Smith's memorandum, he ordered Ramsden to get a plan underway to break through the El Alamein sector and, in the meantime, entrusted Gott with studying of

an enveloping movement of the southern Italo-German flank conducted with an armoured mass.

The meeting ended with a synthesis of the preparations to undertake in view of a probable initiative by Rommel at the end of August. There was no reason to fear a breakthrough between the sea and Ruweisat. The ridges of Ruweisat and Alam el Halfa, key positions, were taking on better defensive value thanks to further works and they would allow the artillery, engaged *en masse,* to shatter the violent thrust of an Italo-German manoeuvre. If Rommel then tried to push eastwards, the British counterattack would hit the left side.

In London, Churchill was unable to curb his irritation or impatience. He was decisively unhappy with the course of operations in Egypt and just as decisively convinced that the Chief Command was not up to the task. Besides, Brooke also nurtured more than a few uncertainties. However, while the former was determined to clean the slate with many people, starting with Auchinleck, the latter kept a certain caution. *"It was clear"*, he agreed, *"that there was something absolutely not right, but it was not easy at that distance to decide what it was and to ascertain how much to influence the situation"*[2]. Both left for Cairo. For Brooke, the trip had been planned for some time and included visits to Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt, Persia and, possibly, India. Churchill, on the other hand, immediately seized the opportunity to meet with Stalin in Moscow to explain the substitution of *Sledgehammer* with *Torch*.

Before leaving, Churchill caught a look at a Telegram from Auchinleck dated 31 July, a part of which said:

> "I presided over a meeting of the commanders of the army corps yesterday where the tactical situation was discussed in depth. Due to our lack of reserves and following the consolidation of the enemy positions, we concluded, though reluctantly, that it is not possible to renew our attempts at breaking through the enemy front or surrounding their southern flank in the current situation.
>
> It is improbable that an opportunity to resume the offensive will present itself before mid-September. That will also depend on the enemy's capacity to re-establish their tank reserves. Provisionally, we will, therefore, stay on the defensive, seeing to details and defensive preparations along the entire front.
>
> In the meantime, we will take immediate advantage of any opportunity to take the offensive all of a sudden and surprise the enemy (...)"[3].

[2] BRYANT A., *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[3] CHURCHILL W., *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

Churchill arrived in Cairo on 4 August, where he had also summoned General Smuts from South Africa and General Wavell from India, more than convinced that Auchinleck should be relieved from the post. After a couple of days of visits, inspections, interviews and consultations, the Premier proposed "*a drastic and immediate change at the heart of the Chief Command*" to the War Cabinet in London. He suggested reorganising the Middle East into two theatres of operation: the Near East to include Egypt, Palestine and Syria, and the Middle East, limited to Persia and Iraq. Auchinleck would assume command of the new Middle East with the 10th Army and General Harold Alexander that of the Near East with the 8th and 9th Armies. Lietenant General Corbett, Chief of Staff of the Chief Command, and General Dorman-Smith, Assistant Chief of Staff, had to be replaced. There were also changes for the 8th Army. General Gott was proposed for the army command and General Ramsden for the substitution; thus new commanders were needed for the 13th and 30th Corps[4]. "*I am sure that the changes will give a new, vigorous boost to the 8th Army*", Churchill assured, "*and will recreate the faith in the Command, that unfortunately does not currently exist* (...)"[5].

The War Cabinet found the reorganisation of the entire middle-eastern region debatable, but in the end accepted the idea, all the more because it was supported by Brooke and Smutts, and gave carte blanche for the nomination of the new commanders. On 7 August, however, the aircraft that transported General Gott was shot down by a German fighter, and so the problem of an 8th Army commander went back on the table. Brooke again suggested Bernard L. Montgomery, who had been his candidate from the beginning, and this time his proposal was accepted.

Auchinleck was still ignorant of the fact that his fate had been decided. Churchill, "*having learned from experience that such communications are better done in written form rather than directly*"[6], sent a letter by airmail in the morning of the 6th, in which he announced the War Cabinet's

[4] There were discussions and hesitations of various sorts regarding the changes, all the more since the expurgation had also reached commanders of the 9th Army (General Wilson) and 10th Army (General Quinan). For the 8th Army Churchill bet on Gott, who, instead, appeared tired and unconfident to Brooke (A. BRYANT, *op. cit.*, p. 410 and following).

[5] CHURCHILL W., *op. cit.*, p. 67. This sentence would cost Churchill a retraction, since, after the war, the text of the telegram would be inserted in the first edition of *Memoirs*. In fact, Dorman-Smith cited Churchill for libel and this was cause for a note of clarification in the following editions (C. BARNETT, *op. cit.*, pp. 338-339).

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

decision and offered him the command of the Persia-Iraq sector, together with that of the 10th Army. Obviously, Auchinleck refused and answered that he preferred to retire.

Alexander reached Cairo on 8 August and two days later Churchill delivered him the orders:

> "1. Your first and main task will be that of capturing and destroying the Italo-German Army commanded by Field Marshal Rommel at the first opportunity, along with all of his supplies and installations in Egypt and Libya.
>
> 2. You will accomplish or will have others accomplish all those other tasks that are under the competence of your Command, without it compromising the task indicated in paragraph 1, which must absolutely be considered the most important in His Majesty's interest"[7].

The change in orders for all the parties concerned was to take place on the 15th. Montgomery arrived on the 12th. He had a meeting with Auchinleck and accepted the suggestion that he go to the front for those three days of available time to get accustomed. Montgomery was at the 8th Army Headquarters at 11:00 on 13 August. He had a look at the situation and at 14:00 he sent a dispatch to Cairo announcing that he would take command immediately. The truth be told, as he admitted years later in his *Memoirs*, he was ready "*to quickly leave the General Headquarters of the army in case there were any repercussions*".

Churchill and Brooke returned from Moscow on 19 August and found Alexander there waiting for them with the latest decoded *Enigma* messages, among them an important dispatch from Rommel to the OKW. It was about the AIT situation on the date of 15 August with the operational design for the planned and, at that point, near offensive. He premised the improvements of the logistic conditions, the arrival of reinforcements, the reorganisation of the Italian divisions, the establishment of a mechanised reserve and the quasi-completion of the defensive works and the minefields. The document indicated the possibility of a British move at the end of the month, but maintained that it would more probably take place after mid-September, with three armoured divisions and six-seven infantry divi-

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 78. In the first meeting with Alexander, Churchill expressed his remorse for the exoneration of Auchinleck with touching words: *"It's like killing a magnificent stag!"* (H. ALEXANDER, *Memorie 1940-1945*, Milan, Garzanti, 1963, p. 19).

sions. The adjustment of the Axis troops for an offensive would be completed as soon as the supplies that were ready in Italy arrived. After which no further improvement of the AIT was to be expected. The ratio of the opposing forces at the end of August showed the AIT had a superiority of 50% for medium calibre artillery and a slight superiority for armour (450-500 tanks versus an estimated 400). The numbers were sufficient for a rapid penetration of the southern sector and an envelopment from the south of the bulk of the 8th Army. The situation would change significantly in September, to the advantage of the British. So, only an action launched on 26 August, the first day of the full moon, could have any possibilities. The Italo-German Army could be ready by that date, but it was necessary for all the arranged materials in the Italian ports to be sent immediately to Tobruk and Bengasi and that the ammunition and fuel supplies to Cirenaica be continuous. Otherwise, postponing the offensive by an entire month would become inevitable, which would make prospects very doubtful[8]. All of Rommel's cards were on the table for the British to see: plan, date, forces, means, supply situation, air support.

Keeping this in mind and remembering Dorman-Smith's memorandum from 27 July, Auchinleck's report held on the 30th and information on the present and future provided by Auchinleck to Churchill and Brooke on more than one occasion, a certain perplexity is inevitable in seeing the emphasis of what was written by the Premier and the British General Chief of Staff. Brooke says in his diary:

> "That evening Montgomery appeared to be in one of the happiest moments in his career (...). He knew that Rommel would attack on a certain date and he showed us the alternatives offered to the German general, not to mention the measures he had taken to confront them.
> He said that he considered the first alternative the most probable, i.e. a penetration into his southern front with a conversion north towards the centre of his positions. He explained how he would crush the attack with his artillery and would reserve the armoured forces for repelling it completely, after the enemy forces had been completely decimated by the artillery fire. His armoured forces would then push Rommel back to the front that he currently occupied and not further.
> As far as he was concerned, he would continue the preparations to launch his offensive, preparations that he had already begun. He would attack the northern sector of the front. He predicted fierce fighting that

[8] HINSLET F.H., *op. cit.*, pp. 408-409 and F. WINTERBOTHAM, *Ultra Secret*, Milan, Mursia, 1976.

would last about a week to break through the enemy lines. Then he would launch his armoured corps (which he called *corps de chasse*), which he had already constituted (...).
(...) I must confess I was shocked by the rapidity with which he had taken control of the situation that he had to face, by the ability with which he had recognised the essential elements, by the lucidity of his plans and, above all, by his boundless faith (...)"[9].

Churchill sent the following report to the War Cabinet from his corner on the 21st:

"1. I have spent the last two days in the Western Desert at the General Headquarters of the 8th Army (...).
2. I am certain that we would have incurred disaster with the previous Command. The army was completely unorganised and subject to disappointment and uncertainty. Evidently, in the case of a violent enemy attack, they had planned to retreat east, towards the Delta. Many had started looking behind them to make sure they had a place in the vehicles. No one had seen to sending precise battle plans to the various units nor had they been given the sense of being led by an energetic and strong-willed Command.
3. The situation appeared so serious that General Montgomery insisted on assuming the command of the 8th Army immediately after visiting the front and Alexander decided the change in posts between the Middle East commanders should occur on day 13 (...)"[10].

The matters of greatest interest are two: the eventuality of a retreat to the Delta and the operational plan for the defensive battle against Rommel's almost certain and desperate last push.

The retreat hypothesis probably constituted the heaviest criticism of Auchinleck's action. Even Alexander and Montgomery spoke of it. The former recalled the meeting with Auchinleck with detachment: "*I do not remember speaking with him about matters of great importance, but his insistence that the 8th Army remain intact left an impression on me*"[11], and in the official report at the end of the campaign he wrote, "*It was general-*

[9] A. BRYANT, *op. cit.*, p. 439. For the purposes of comparison, it is interesting to look at the parallels between the Dorman-Smith memorandum and Montgomery's plan.
[10] W. CHURCHILL, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
[11] H. ALEXANDER, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

ly known that as a last resource the army would retreat further, on the basis of the theory that it had to stay together". Consequently, he made it known immediately that the next defensive battle would be fought to the death on the El Alamein positions.

As a matter of fact, all of the rear installations arranged by Auchinleck were notable for their forces and extent. The 10th Corps was sent there, charged with defending Alexandria and the Delta (and to receive the 8th Army in retreat), and the Command of the British troops in Egypt, interested in Cairo and the Nile Valley. Had everything fallen apart, most of the army would have continued the retreat to Palestine, while the rest would have gone down into the Nile Valley. For Alexander, the defence of the Delta, after an enemy breakthrough at El Alamein, constituted an expression without operational meaning, so every measure in its favour would have been misappropriated. So, a week later, he ordered the 10th Corps to redirect itself and join the 8th Army and that the Command of the British troops in Egypt (General Stone) provide for the security of the Delta.

Montgomery also struck the note of a possible retreat involving the army:

> "All of the instructions in force and the plans for further retreats were repealed and I made it unequivocally clear that there would be no retreating from the El Alamein line. If Rommel attacked, we would resist him where we were. This change in tactics (...)"[12].

Besides that, he comes back to the subject in his *Memoirs,* referring to a meeting had with Auchinleck. He resented it and protested publicly stating that

> "it is incorrect and absurd to sustain that, at that time, I was examining a retreat from the El Alamein position. A similar plan had stopped being taken into consideration from the beginning of July 1942, when Rommel had been forced to the defensive and the 8th Army had reacquired the possibility of attacking"[13].

Now, it is very true that the hypothesis of going to the Delta in desperate circumstances, valid until mid-July at most, appeared improbable at the end of July and incongruent by mid-August. Even more so since two *Enigma* messages were decoded at the beginning of that month, transmit-

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[12] BERNARD L. MONTGOMERY, *Da El Alamein al fiume Sangro*, Milan, Garzanti, 1950, p. 5.

[13] J. CONNEL, *op. cit.*, p. 716 and C. BARNETT, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-345. The editor of Montgomery's *Memoirs* inserted a clarifying note in the following editions (C. BARNETT, *op. cit.*, App. A).

ted some days before by Rommel to Berlin, in which there appeared the clear intention of launching an offensive and the impossibility of enacting it, at least for the moment due to the insufficient provisions. Yet it is just as doubtless that Auchinleck held the principle of keeping the troops from a possible destruction as fully valid and that the Delta forces seemed excessive, even if they were kept there for amalgamation and training reasons.

The second subject concerns the defence plan, as after the war Montgomery was accused of having followed Dorman-Smith's memorandum, which had been completely accepted by Auchinleck.

> "I can't imagine", Alexander observed, "that Montgomery would be interested in the opinion of someone else on how to fight the war in the desert; and furthermore in my conversations with Auchinleck before he assumed command, there wasn't any trace of a defensive plan that was similar in any way to the Alam Halfa battle picture as it was actually fought"[14].

Moreover, alluding to the cited memorandum, he added, "(...) *we are dealing with a document of approximately four thousand words, that for its verbosity, I imagine, would have been put aside if it had ever been in sight of the new 8th Army commander*"[15].

Alexander dedicated some pages to the subject because a sentence from his official report was used as decisive proof against Montgomery. After having reminded that the plan consisted in holding the area between the sea and Ruweisat as firmly as possible and threatening any Italo-German penetration south of this on the flank by organising a defence on the Alam Halfa ridge, he specified:

> "(...) I would therefore like to say that the plan developed naturally on its own. When I made reference to the plan in that paragraph, I was certainly not alluding to a plan devised by my predecessor"[16].

The controversial sentence of the report is the following: "*General Montgomery, now in command of the 8th Army, accepted this plan on the whole and I agreed with him*"[17]. In these regards, Alexander stated:

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[14] H. ALEXANDER, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[17] H. ALEXANDER, *Despatch* in *The African Campaign from El Alamein to Tunis, from 10th August 1942 to 13th May*, supplement to the *London Gazette* of 5 February, 1948, p. 841.

"This sentence, that among other things does not stand, has very often been cited against Montgomery; but it does not appear in the original, which is in my hands, and how it ended up in there is still an object of useless conjecture today"[18].

Without wanting to enter into an old controversy, by picking out certain apparent contradictions from the *Memoirs*, one could conclude saying that Montgomery's static defence scheme remained more or less that of Auchinleck because the terrain was what it was and if the Italo-German offensive proved to be a fixed rhyme in the end, as Alexander pointed out, it would happen that way for the British defence as well. Yet there existed, and here it is necessary to agree with Alexander, a very marked difference in the organisation of the dynamic response and in the way the battle was conducted. The importance of Alam Halfa was not highlighted in Auchinleck's conception, which seemed oriented on a system of strongholds tending to be in echelon, and a uniform garrison. And although the ridge in dispute had already become, also in Alexander's opinion, a sturdy stronghold, analogous to those that had been prepared in the El Alamein sector since the beginning of July, it was given such determining value by Montgomery as to warrant concentrating an entire division on it. Furthermore, while Auchinleck, who had arranged his forces in a way that was absolutely original, intended to keep the bulk of the field artillery mobile (with relevant protection from motorised infantry) and all of the armoured units "*for attacking the enemy with fire every time he presented himself*", Montgomery wanted to avoid having his tanks enter the field until the last moment, so that, as he put it, they would not "*fall into any of Rommel's traps*".

Finally, other preparations immediately undertaken, in his opinion, by Montgomery, such as the substitution of commanders and the flowing of units and supplies in line, were really already underway. Instead, where he made himself clearly felt was in the realm of psychology and order.

Despite the assessments made in Great Britain, it does not seem that the morale of the 8th Army was down to the ground at all and that the units had lost faith in Auchinleck, whose personal prestige among the troops was still very high. Montgomery knew how to emphasize and advertise the decisions that had already been made. He announced and ordered the resistance to the bitter end, explicitly discarding the hypothesis of any further retreat, while

[18] H. ALEXANDER, *Memorie*, *cit.*, p. 32.

waiting to resume the initiative. The simple and repeated statement of such firm intention and, above all, the arrival of fresh divisions first made spirits more convinced of the near future, then certain of victory.

The second problem he faced was that of the war machine. Auchinleck's revolutionary ideas are known: the idea of giving life to the "brigade group" as a fundamental pawn in combat, the recourse to particular combat groups based on the artillery, the use of *Jock columns*. All these, with the difficulties of the situation and the possible greater flexibility conferred on the divisions, had objectively led to the disintegration of the army corps. As if this were not enough, he proposed unifying the type of divisions, with the aim of rendering the army ever more manoeuvrable. General McCreery, sent to the Middle East in March as an armoured war expert (and now Alexander's Chief of General Staff) was interrogated by Auchinleck about the assignment of an armoured brigade to each infantry division and the constitution of a light armoured division formed by joining all the *Crusaders* together. He expressed such a curt denial as to provoke the sharp warning that, if he were not in order with these ideas, he could go back to Great Britain.

This state of things also appeared to be influenced by the observable lack of coordination between the infantry, the tanks and the artillery that had significantly weighed on the negative outcome of many conflicts, causing deep tension. Kippenberger's observation after the first fight for Ruweisat is typical in these regards:

> "In those days, in the sphere of the 8th Army, and not just the New Zealand division, there was an intense lack of confidence, almost hostility, towards our armoured units. Everywhere you heard stories about units from other branches left in trouble; it was considered self-evident that the tanks would not arrive in time where others were waiting for them"[19].

The *Ultra* decoding system was getting a better organisation. Four SLUs (Special Liaison Units) had been installed in the Middle East: one in Cairo for the Commanders in Chief, one at the 8th Army Headquarters, one at the *Desert Air Force* Headquarters and a fourth one on Malta[20]. In part

[19] H. KIPPENBERGER, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

[20] The measures intended to preserve the secrecy of *Ultra* were rigorously respected. The situations and movements found out through the decoding of German *Enigma* messages were immediately covered with the dispatch of reconnaissance planes, the arrival of which in the zone of interest led the Axis Headquarters to attribute their intervention to the discovery of a convoy in the Mediterranean or the concentration of troops in Northern Africa.

for this, in part because of the operational standstill and the necessity for a rapid reorganization, Rommel was led to send data rich messages, and the Italo-German Army's pulse was felt by British commanders as they had never dared to hope. On 17 August the picture received the final brushstroke: Rommel had decided to attack on the 26th.

In contrast with Auchinleck, Montgomery would not permit the Italo-German penetration to be able to end up at the back of the defence, but to avoid this danger he needed other forces. He knew that there were divisions assigned to the 8th Army in the Delta that were not yet ready for battle. Seeing as how he was dealing with defence, he thought he would not run a lot of risks if he used other units immediately. So, in the evening of the 14th, he asked for the 44th Infantry Division (General Hughes), which had been planned to intervene for the end of the month, to be sent to the front immediately. The Division was brought to the line between the 16th and 17th. Its 132nd Brigade passed under the tactical command of the 2nd New Zealand Division, which was always over two brigades and the bulk substituted the 21st Indian Brigade at Alam el Halfa. So the 30th Corps (still kept by Ramsden) had the 9th Australian Division, the 1st South African and the 5th Indian, all arranged at significant depths, with the 23rd Armoured Brigade in reserve. Between 15 and 25 August the 13th was completed (entrusted to General Horrocks) with the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 44th Infantry Division, the 7th Armoured Division and the 10th Armoured Division.

Moreover, a wide deception plan was conceived, laying mock minefields, raising mock positions, showing groups of fake tanks. A measure that they thought would be determining to the failure of Rommel's plan was the deliberate loss of a map that falsified the indications of tracks and road conditions. In particular, an area of soft sand south of Alam el Halfa was presented as solid terrain. Actually, it did not have much effect on the events.

On the 16th the 8th Army Headquarters was moved to Burg el Arab, on the seaside, near that of the *Desert Air Force* and the proximity of the two headquarters allowed for a distinct harmony in the agreements for air-land cooperation. As of 20 August, the air raid missions on battlefield objectives doubled. On the 21st bombardments started again "twenty-four hours a day".

On the 24th the decoding of an *Enigma* message from the 21st provided sensational news. Rommel, who had fallen ill, had asked to be relieved by Guderian! On the 25th at midnight it was known that the OKW did not have any generals of armoured troops available to make the substitution, so Marshal Kesselring would be taking the reins of the AIT. Evidently, under those circumstances, at least the day the offensive would begin became uncertain, all the more because other *Enigma* communications

showed that the German troops still needed 15,000 reservists, and that the AIT had consumed more than what had arrived, ever reducing their autonomy, and that the difficulties in the area of fuel were serious.

On 28 August the DAK had gone from 133 efficient medium tanks at the beginning of the month to 234, of which 171 (?) Pzkw III J equipped with a long-barrelled 50 mm calibre cannon and 26 Pzkw IV J with 75 mm calibre long-barreled gun, while the XX Italian Corps had gone up from 96 to 281 tanks, of which 234 were medium. News about the Axis Air Forces was also abundant. At the end of August the availability of *Fliegerführer* had reached 298 aircraft and that of the 5th Italian Air Corps 460.

Finally, the morning of the 29th, when the period of the full moon was about to end, *Ultra* confirmed that the Italo-German offensive had not been cancelled yet. In the late afternoon of the following day, other interceptions and the *Desert Air Force* warned that the enemy had assembled to attack[21] but Montgomery was calm. He had more than 700 tanks available versus little more than 500 of the adversary's. Most of the anti-tank regiments had received 6-pounder guns and many of the infantry battalions, 2-pounder cannons. The Ruweisat and Alam el Halfa positions were solidly fortified and garrisoned. The *Desert Air Force* opposed at least 500 efficient aircraft against the 750 Axis airplanes, a third of which was not even usable. Everything confirmed that Rommel, in precarious physical condition, was on the point of a desperate attempt.

In the meantime, in the Mediterranean, Great Britain had played a very important card. Despite the new Axis air offensive, Malta was slowly reacquiring a determining influence in the development of the war in North Africa, but its intense and profitable air activity, always limited in numbers, required a large consumption of fuel. The preparation of another convoy was therefore necessary.

Operation *Pedestal,* as it was called, had different characteristics from the previous one in mid-June. First of all, it was clear the fate of Malta and probably the 8th Army would depend on its positive outcome or its failure. Secondly, the strategic situation prevented anything from leaving from the east. As a consequence, it was necessary for the convoy's escort to reveal itself as strong enough to keep the Italian fleet at bay, and that the strength of the above-mentioned escort charged with protecting the cargo to the island was increased, that the number of overall fighter planes (from the aircraft carriers and from Malta) allowed for combat both against the fighter planes and the attacks against the Axis bombers. The seriousness of the

[21] F.H. HINSLEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 411-412.

task appeared surmountable thanks to two events that occurred in other theatres of operation: the suspension of the Arctic convoys heading for Russia, and the American victory at Midway, which had diminished the urgency for a reinforcement of the Indian Ocean fleet.

Operation *Pedestal* was prepared carefully. The convoy, called WS.21/S, was composed of eleven British ships and three American, and the escort was structured in two groups. The Z Force (Admiral Syfret), composed of the aircraft carriers *Victorious*, *Indomitable* and *Eagle*, the battleships, *Nelson* and *Rodney*, three anti-aircraft cruisers and fourteen destroyers, had the task of accompanying the convoy to the entry to the Canal of Sicily. The X Force (Admiral Burrough), made up of three cruisers, an anti-aircraft cruiser and twelve destroyers, would continue with the cargo all the way to Malta. The logistic support was guaranteed by the R Force: two petrol tankers and two tug boats, escorted by four corvettes. Eight destroyers remained in reserve for various tasks.

Overall, the aircraft carriers had taken 82 fighter planes and 28 *Albacore* air-torpedo planes on board. At the last minute an aircraft carrier, *Furious,* was added with 38 *Spitfires* earmarked for Malta, which had already been reinforced with units coming from Great Britain and Egypt, so as to be able to employ 177 efficient combat planes and 16 reconnaissance planes. Eight submarines, two in patrols at a distance from north-eastern Sicily and six acting as a screen south of Pantelleria, completed the system. It was the most powerful fleet to have ever escorted a convoy to Malta. Furthermore, another convoy was simulated in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. It, too, headed for the island as a decoy.

The ships passed through the Strait of Gibraltar in the early hours of 10 August. They were reported by agents of the Axis, but the High Command of the Navy *(Supermarina)* in Rome had already been warned for some days and the British move was foreseen by the other side. Unfortunately, an intervention by the battleships based in Taranto was unthinkable, being out of diesel, so an engagement of submarines was decided for the entire route of the convoy between the Balearic Islands and the Strait of Messina; MAS (fast torpedo boats) and motor torpedo boats in night action between Capo Bon and Pantelleria; the 3rd and 7th Naval Divisions (six cruisers and eleven destroyers) south of Pantelleria in the morning of 13 August.

In the skies, the II *Fliegerkorps* was temporarily reinforced by Kesselring and slowed the pressure on Malta, so that from the night of the 11th on, it could count on 426 combat planes. With these he had to carry out a first

attack at twilight on 11 August, a mass action the following day and interventions on the basis of the development of operations on the 13th. The High Command of the Air Force *(Superaereo)*, from its corner, ordered that the Air Force Headquarters of Sardinia, which put 180 aircraft in line, concentrate the maximum force in the morning of the 12th and then continue according to circumstances, and that the Air Force Headquarters of Sicily, whose availability amounted to 126 planes, attack *en masse* in the afternoon of the 12th and then it too should regulate itself in relation to the course of the situation.

The first contact was made at 13:15 on 11 August. The U-boat U73 torpedoed the *Eagle* aircraft carrier, which sank in eight minutes. The first German air incursion occurred at sunset and was carried out by thirty aircraft, yet it was unable to cause any damage to the ships. The 12th, 13th, and 14th of August were the crucial days. For the first and last time, the dispositions of the Strait of Messina were implemented efficiently. In three days, the Axis forces were able to sink two cruisers, one destroyer and nine big steamers. They were also able to seriously damage one aircraft carrier, two cruisers, two destroyers, two steamers and a tanker, and defeat or shoot down 44 airplanes. The losses for the attacker amounted to two submarines, 32 Italian airplanes and 18 German, while two Italian cruisers and a German motor torpedo boat were damaged.

If on the one hand the operation turned into a tactical success of significant value for the Axis, on the other hand the incompleteness of this success, which we shall come to, translated into a real advantage for the British. The arrival of 32,000 tons of supplies and 11,000 tons of fuel on Malta allowed Lord Gort to make it to winter's threshold, although with strict rationing, and to resume the air interventions against maritime traffic heading for Libya once more[22].

After Operation *Pedestal,* the last to meet up with strong opposition, the recourse to rapid ground units and submarines was sufficient for Great Britain to supply the island above all with the diesel necessary for the light units, detached to La Valletta again, to act against the Italo-German steamers.

2. The Italo-German Intentions

As soon as the series of conflicts in July came to an end, Cavallero wanted to confront the problem he had already been mulling over for

[22] For the air-naval battle in mid-August, please refer to G. FIORAVANZO, *op. cit.*, p. 350 and following; A. SANTONI and F. MATTESINI, *op. cit.*, p. 233 and following; G. SANTORO, *op. cit.*, p. 396 and following; I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, *op. cit.*, p. 316 and following.

weeks: a change in the organisation of the high level command in Africa. On 30 July, after having gone to consult with the King in Rome (28 July) and with Mussolini in Rimini (the 29th), he reported something important in his diary, "*I received Scuero (*Assistant Secretary of War*). New disposition for Libya. Enough with Bastico at this point: this is the Duce's opinion. Bastico-Rommel-Barbasetti relations. It is necessary to bring Rommel into the Supreme Command's direct dependence*". In about ten days the provision was passed. Besides the dissatisfaction with Bastico's work, about which no negative remarks were made, a clear desire to have a direct link with Rommel about operational subjects without intermediaries emerged. For the non-operational aspects, a "flexible coupling" was applied instead, as defined by Cavallero: the Delegation of the Supreme Command in North Africa *(Delease)*. The High Command of the Armed Forces in North Africa, under Bastico's command, just promoted to the rank of field marshal, was renamed High Command of the Armed Forces in Libya *(Superlibia),* and its military jurisdiction was extended to all the territories under the authority of the General Government of Libya.

Delease, on the other hand, was entrusted to General Barbasetti (though he initially had to continue to hold his office as Chief of General Staff of *Superlibia*) with the task of providing for the logistic supplying of the Italian Armed Forces operating in Egypt, the coordination and efficiency of Italian and German supplies beyond the border and assuming command of the area behind the front. All was based on the directives of the Supreme Command, and availed itself of the North African Logistic Headquarters and its orders, of the Libyan Naval Headquarters with its coasting flotillas and the port organisations at Bengasi, Derna, Tobruk and Bardia, as well as of the *Superlibia*'s Artillery and Engineers Corps Headquarters in relation to the above-mentioned tasks.

As it can be understood, at that point they were in the exact realm of functions of a normal Theatre Logistic Headquarters. Furthermore, the 5th Air Corps was placed under the command of *Delease* along with the detached Italian air forces in Egypt. Certainly, the new order of things could not but satisfy Rommel, who acquired greater freedom of action, but just as certainly, it presented an affectedness that was not at all necessary.

There is no doubt the High Command was weighed down by its numerous functions. The double role of General Governor of Libya and High Commander, held by Bastico, and a bureaucratic procedure that brought the most modest questions up to his level were harmful. It is just

as undeniable that the logistic organisation was quite unsatisfactory in a broad sense due to the multiplicity of the tasks and an inadequate reduction of the command. However, it is necessary to recognise that Rommel had often obtained decisions that were in conflict with the High Command by going directly to the OKW or the Supreme Command through von Rintelen, and that Kesselring, whose discord with Rommel was well-known and evident, had interfered in operations more than once, although with good intentions. Moreover, Riccardi and Fougier had often issued orders to the Navy of Libya and the 5th Air Corps without even informing Bastico. Finally, the High Command had never had the slightest interference in the flow of supplies leaving Italy. Yet the measures taken cannot be considered convincing.

In fact, all of a sudden *Superlibia* found itself deprived of its logistic apparatus and, consequently, forced to go to *Delease* for everything. *Delease* would not only concede bodies and vehicles keeping them in their employment (!) but would inevitably concentrate every attention on the Egyptian sector. This happened when the hypothesis of an Anglo-American landing in French North Africa was not considered to be a remote prospect in Rome. So the North Africa Logistic Headquarters exercised its jurisdiction on a depth of territory of about 2,300 kilometres through three subordinate Logistic Delegations; no. 1, with a headquarters in Tripoli, saw to the necessities of the Tripolitania; no. 2, in Bengasi, to those of Cirenaica; no. 3, detached to Matruh, to those of the AIT. In short, at first, when it found itself under the orders of the High Command, it supplied Delegation no. 3 leaving them a certain autonomy, at least under the profile of adherence to the development of operations. Then, instead, considering the way it was directed eastwards by *Delease,* the "territorial" needs of *Superlibia* were little appreciated.

After the war, Bastico wrote in private correspondence:

> "(...) But, contrary to my explicit belief, well-known to General [sic] Cavallero, (...) General Cavallero was also convinced that Alexandria would fall into the hands of the Armed Forces in North Africa within a few days; and I (though I don't know if it is right or wrong) have always been of the opinion that the decision to take me from the high command of the Armed Forces in North Africa and to constitute a Delegation under the direct dependence of the High Command was not exempt from the

[23] DSCS, ph. 31900/Op. dated 12/8/1942.

interest of not sharing the glory of the next triumph in Alexandria among three people, when it could easily be reserved to just two"[24].

However, in the only official document that results as being sent about the subject by *Superlibia* after the change, Bastico wrote: "This first month of experience with the new organization given to the High Command of North Africa (...) allows us to state that the system has worked well on a fairly regular basis (...)" and, beyond a clarification of the functions, he asked for his own Logistic Headquarters. In Cavallero's diary, it can be found, instead, that another person touched on the subject *apertis verbi*. On 19 September Major Melchiorri, Chief of *Superlibia*'s Propaganda Office and a national counselor, wrote privately to Cavallero, with whom he was familiar:

"(...) In my opinion the creation of *Delease* increases the possibility of disagreement among the various Commands in North Africa. If in fact we had disagreements between the Italian High Command and the German Command, now that also becomes a possibility between *Delease* and *Superlibia,* increasing the reasons for conflict from two to three (...).
The creation of *Delease* has increased the already insufficient personnel, the office files and the needs of communications, has put many offices in embarrassing situations and creates a series of problems for *Superlibia,* that has to go to *Delease* for its needs with the certainty, at this point, that not all of its requests are considered and granted in a timely manner (...)".

To tell the truth, it seems that Mussolini had demonstrated hesitation and reticence when confronted with the measure, which evidently did not convince him, in a meeting he had with Cavallero on 10 August. Thus, the latter hastened to send a personal message to *Palazzo Venezia* for the Duce the next day:

"I refer to your communications of yesterday about the organisation of the Command in North Africa; allow me to express with devoted spirit some subordinate considerations.

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[24] A. TEDDE, *Fiamme sul deserto*, Venice, Cisalpino, 1962, p. 286. Tedde also says that Bastico sent a personal letter to Cavallero resigning from all posts and that Cavallero rejected it stating that he, not Bastico, was the judge and arbitrator of the situation. Such a letter does not appear in the historical diaries of the Supreme Command and *Superlibia* or in Cavallero's diary. Therefore one is inclined to think it more probable that Bastico had *shown his intention* in a confidential way and that Cavallero had easily dissuaded him with simple reasoning.

The plan to subordinate the Italo-German Army to the Supreme Command was not born, as you know, from a desire to free H.E. Bastico from it; rather it was born from an objective necessity: that of giving our action of command and collaboration with respect to that army the incisive energy and efficiency that, for a number of reasons, has not been achieved up to now, as it has been verified.

You know, Duce, that I was worried about protecting *camerata* Bastico's person; who, in order to immediately clear the air of this subject, cannot find it unpleasant that the promotion to Italian Marshal falls in the moment in which, for higher reasons, he ceases *Superasi* Command. This form and way of rewarding agrees with our best military tradition.

On the other had, I think that giving information to the press of said cessation and passage of the Italo-German Army to the direct orders of the Supreme Command should be avoided. It is uniquely military information, therefore confidential.

Not that it should remain a secret, but the public will become aware of it little by little; in a short time, it will be entered into their consciousness that the leadership is all but directly held in the hands of the Duce.

But besides this subject, I would like to draw your attention to another. It is evident that the person who has to see to a vast territory like Libya and Egypt, and attend to minding the Government, which is also absorbing, cannot oversee the inherent tasks with the *extraordinary energy* that the situation requires. It entails much more than just the post of commander, but also the complex organisation of supplies, the ports, the communications, the planning, the defence across those vast spaces with a tight organisation that we know *does not exist,* in part because of lack of means, but also because of human error.

This has been, more than anything, the biggest reason for the lessening, partly undeserved, of our prestige. No resentment; but it is in these *cracks* that the German part has insinuated and insinuates with its many strong ramifications. This penetration is incessant, while, through a manifest lack of action by the Command, the way has been opened to a prevalence of German elements, major and minor, extraneous to Rommel's proper army, that, indeed, act to carry out their duty, but, where we are concerned, have certainly substituted us in many areas to an undesirable extent. Even the leaders, Kesselring and Weichold and other minor characters take advantage of this situation in order to dominate more and more everyday.

In the face of this situation it appears necessary:

1st - to assign the tasks of command and organisation, if even *partially,* to a body that can dedicate itself entirely to them, without being distracted by other worries;

2nd - to reinforce this body with men of certain preparation and energy, directed by the orders of the Supreme Command;

3rd - to put this body in the position of being able to speak in the name of the Supreme Command, that is with the authority that it derives from its *faultless functioning* and from the higher authority from which the body emanates;

4th - to grant the direct intervention to the Supreme Command for both supporting the action of this body and for acting of its own initiative as necessary, without delaying intermediaries.

Duce, the pace of our work at A.S.I. (North African Logistic Headquarters) is such that only this direct action can face the growing necessities and difficulties and enable us to march beside our German *camerati's* activities. As they only have to attend to this task, the Germans do their utmost to carry out their small and large goals with exceptional energy and make comparisons that are not always to our advantage.

The current organisation of the Headquarters in the A.S.I. does not allow us to do what is necessary, while what has been decided assures us an immediateness of action that, if well-directed as it will be, will be able to give us urgent results that we must actualize at all costs.

Just as I fully understand the high political importance of your considerations, Duce, I also perceive the political value or prestige that, next to the military one, produces the situation I am dealing with, a situation that deserves to be corrected, as soon as possible, at all costs.

This will be achieved with the measures that have been decided, soon I hope.

These measures, Duce, were communicated to *Superasi* after I felt I had your approval and were also pointed out to the German part, it being necessary to agree upon some of the modalities of common interest. The German part informed the OKW and gave notice to Marshal Rommel.

So *Superasi* issued all the executive dispositions to implement, which must go into effect tomorrow the 12th, with all Italian military authorities as well as Marshal Rommel.

I will now take the liberty of putting a related consideration before you that, besides coming late, as things are, a suspension of the measure would have unfavourable repercussions in our military structure in the

A.S.I., as occurs with counter-orders in general. As for the German part, it considers the measure as definitive.
I considered it my duty, Duce, to express the considerations that my conscience and devotion suggested to me, after which the orders that you want to give me will be faithfully executed"[25].

The letter was arguable in every aspect, however Mussolini ended up adhering and the reorganization became effective on 16 August instead of the 12th.

The entire Italian organization of command, even at the highest level, presented serious imbalances deriving in part from the mentality, in part from the combining of posts, in part from the presence of German bodies to which orders could not be given and that, on the other hand, the Italians did not want to get too involved in their decisions. The decision to avoid the constitution of joint command posts, in the desire to underline the Italian character of the war in the Mediterranean and in North Africa, was a ball and chain that would hamper the Axis war machine.

The notification of the entrance of 39 British ships in the Mediterranean between 0:30 and 2:00 hours on 10 August reached *Supermarina* at about 4:00. Later the news arrived that in the early morning about ten enemy warships had left Gibraltar. At 11:15, Cavallero called General Santoro on the telephone, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Air Force, who openly confessed being ignorant of the event. At which point, Cavallero ordered the beginning of reconnaissance and the preparation of air-torpedoes and a fighter escort. Then he called Admiral Riccardi reprimanding *Supermarina* and *Superaereo's* lack of intelligence. After this example of how things worked at the top, we shall make note of the relationship between the two allies' Air Force and Navy Headquarters.

On 23 July, Fougier, Kesselring, the Commander of the Air Force Sicily (General Scaroni) and the Commander of the II *Fliegerkorps* (General Loerzer) met in Taormina to examine the Malta question. It had become current again when, because of pressure from Hitler, the choice between Operation C3 and the exploitation of success pushed to the limit in Egypt had fallen on the latter. On 30 June Kesselring had summoned Scaroni and Loerzer, communicating that, on the basis of the decision to also employ the units reserved to the C3, the Air Force Sicily and the II *Fliegerkorps* had to unleash a new vigorous air offensive on Malta with all

[25] Cavallero's diary.

of their forces, with the purpose of guaranteeing the journey of convoys bound for Libya. He had been optimistic, he too evidently affected by the general euphoria, because, in his opinion, "*in three or five days of offensive the balance, if not supremacy, will be re-established*"[26].

The offensive did not last five days, but rather fifteen and did not lead to the results hoped for; rather, it seemed that the brief reduction in the losses of merchant ships was due more to the scarcity of fuel and munitions on the enemy side than to the effectiveness of the Axis incursions. On 14 July, the transfer of units to *Fliegerführer Afrika* rendered the abandonment of the air raids and the passing to the tactics of *active defence* inevitable, aimed at preventing aggressive activity by Malta's aviation, more than seeking its destruction. It was a forced stopgap that was even less efficient than the *continued offensive;* in fact, getting its breath back in a hurry, the island's *Royal Air Force* got reinforced and took up raging against the convoys and airports of Sicily again.

So that, when, on 23 July, the aforementioned conference of the OBS Command took place, everyone's dissatisfaction was notable.

> "The discussion", Santoro then said, "had characteristics of animosity and even drama never had in such meetings. Departing from the statement that the turnout of the Italian fighters in that last week had not been as promised, above all for the fact that some units were not always engaged two or three times in the same day, the Commander of the II CAT, supported by Marshal Kesselring, added the accusation that the Italian Air Force was not aware enough of the importance of the situation in Egypt, and that the fighter units in Sicily were not sufficiently committed, as the Germans were, to the common task of keeping Malta's air forces under control.
>
> The Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Commander of the Air Force of Sicily, while admitting that the activity of the dependent fighter divisions had not always maintained the level hoped for, promised and wanted, had to emphasize the poverty of our situation, to demonstrate that it was not due to an inconceivable lack of understanding on the part of the Commands and commitment of the personnel, but to multiple causes, among which some of a fortuitous nature and others of a general nature (...).
>
> It was concluded that you could request effort from the men that was superior to normal possibilities (something that, among other things,

[26] G. SANTORO, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

happened in Sicily, given that the number of pilots often exceeded the number of available aircraft) but, by making the machines work far beyond the limits of their structural characteristics, you would run the risk of not having the working aircraft at some time (...)"[27].

In the end, Kesselring and Loerzer stated recognising the Italian difficulties and, in the area of resuming the pressure on Malta again in the best way possible, the daytime actions were entrusted to the German bombers escorted prevalently by Italian fighters and the night time ones to the Italian bombers.

Of course, conflicts also existed in the naval sector:

"The OBS situation with respect to the Italians", reported Admiral Weichold to the SKL, "is difficult because, in spite of how much they turn to the Headquarters for advice in critical cases, then they end up doing what they want, above all, to escape executing the decisions that were wrenched out of them with difficulty. A unit of command does not exist in the Mediterranean, but rather a weakened form of plurality of command achieved through numerous agreements and the good will of the leaders"[28].

Let's now go back to Operation *Pedestal*. Apart from the fact that the doubt about an attempt at landing in Tunisia only came about in the evening of the 12th, when the convoy was cut in half, the day of the 12th saw the Chief of the General Staff busy listening to possibilities and the opinions of the Italo-German armed forces involved, to then end up with Mussolini's decision late at night.

It dealt with choosing a tactic to employ for the definitive destruction of the convoy. *Supermarina* had established to join together the 3rd and 7th Naval Divisions in the Tyrrhenian in the afternoon of the 12th to concentrate them south of Pantelleria at dawn on the 13th. But at 8:30 of that 12 August, Cavallero received a telegram from Kesselring, that stated not being able to provide protection for the Naval forces because all of his fighters were engaged in the escort of the bombers, and he suggested turning to laying sea-mines as an alternate measure.

Cavallero had a first meeting with the Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs of Staff of the Navy and Air Force at 10:30. Admiral Riccardi reported that

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 285.

[28] See also SANTONI and MATTESINI, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

the minefield was already in place and that two enemy ships had crossed it without losses by pure chance. Then he reminded them that the intervention of the naval group was subject to a minimum of protection. Cavallero then wanted to go to Mussolini with Riccardi and Fougier and summon a second afternoon meeting with von Rintelen and Weichold as well. The latter, who had in the meantime tried to convince Kesselring to support the naval action with no result, at 14:00 reported that he found his own participation useless if a representative from OBS was not also present. "*Please communicate to Gen. von Rintelen*", Cavallero noted in his diary, "*that the meeting was to decide about the escort. Seeing as how there is not any, the meeting is cancelled*".

Obviously, something had to be established anyway and in the afternoon, at 16:35; the Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs of Staff of the Navy and the Air Force met at the Supreme Command again. The latest news on the losses that the British convoy was suffering was comforting. Riccardi stated that he would be happy with 18 aircraft in the day, to allow for a nine-hour escort. The brief consequent exchange of ideas is reported in Cavallero's diary:

> "H.E. Fougier considers them insufficient. Admiral Sansonetti says 30 of them are necessary. I point out that we need to employ what we have and that is 24. H.E. Fougier agrees but does not guarantee the quality [it was a newly formed group and some RO 2000] and adds that the enemy forces are superior to our own. He confirms, however, that there will be an attack from Sicily this evening, not considering the German one (...) I ask Admiral Riccardi if the employment of the naval force would be worthwhile in relation to the risk. Admiral Riccardi answers that it is not worthwhile. H.E. Fougier says that Marshal Kesselring has exactly the same opinion. I assert that the risk is not in the enemy's naval strength, but in the enemy's air strength because Malta is working well. Therefore, if the Navy does not intend to commit itself, we can save the escort. Admiral Riccardi agrees and answers that the risk is too great for the Navy (...)".

At 17:30 Cavallero, Riccardi and Fougier went back to *Palazzo Venezia* and illustrated the situation to Mussolini. "*I pointed out to the Duce that there was not a German air escort and that the possibility of our own escort was not well-defined yet*", Cavallero noted and, back at the Supreme Command, he gave the Chiefs of Staff leave, recommending they think over the subject well and "*this evening each tell the Duce your opin-*

ions clearly, one about the commitment of naval forces and the other about whether or not there is a possibility of an escort".

It is not over. At 19:30 another meeting. Fougier proposed waiting for the results of the air attack on the convoy, as losses were confirmed as being serious, and then determine whether or not to commit naval forces with the Italian escort whose dubious efficiency was well-known. Riccardi remarked that he could wait for the decision until the following dawn, but with that escort and given the seriousness of the threat from Malta, he did not think it was advisable to give the go ahead to the cruisers. Sansonetti added that the important forces of the Royal Air Force on Malta had caused little trouble up to that point, evidently because they were earmarked to hit one of our naval formations, were it to venture into those waters. With that, the session was dissolved and Cavallero, Riccardi and Fougier went back to *Palazzo Venezia* (at 20:45) where the question remained unsettled.

At 23.00 Mussolini called the Supreme Command where Cavallero had once again summoned the involved military leaders. He summed up the news and highlighted that our naval formation had been sighted by the adversary and *"a short time ago there were 3 reconnaissance planes and 6 bombers flying over it. It will undergo attacks all night"*. Then he explained that, according to Riccardi and Fougier, present, the ships would be worn down for the entire night and would find themselves overrun by the air offence departing from Malta tomorrow, *"therefore running the risk is not repaid by a corresponding return"*. In short, the decision was that the pursuit of attack against the convoy would remain entrusted to the Air Force and the OBS (from which no news had arrived). The 3rd Naval Division headed towards Navarino in support of the 8th Division, considered insufficient to oppose the British formation spotted in the east, and the 7th Division came back to the base[29].

There is another version of the development of events, according to which:

> "The evening of 12 August, *Supermarina* and Admiral Weichold fought long against *Superaereo,* Kesselring and the Supreme Command, to assure the escort of fighters for the cruisers: but, as Weichold wrote in

[29] On 12 August Rommel had the possibility that the convoy sighted in the eastern Mediterranean was interested in landing at Tobruk or Sollum-Marsa Matruh shown to the High Command. For such an eventuality, having also considered the possibility of a simultaneous land attack on the El Alamein front, Rommel ordered the repositioning of the 3rd Recce Group to Sollum and the 580th Recce Group to Matruh and kept a tactical group ready composed of a German motor regiment and a recce group from the XX Army Corps.

> the already cited document, *"that provoked a heated discussion between the leaders of the various armed forces, during which the representatives of the two Navies remained alone against the others. Therefore, they called Mussolini for a decision, who declared himself in favour of air combat. So the cruiser operation, which was already underway, was interrupted"*. In so doing, a unique opportunity for a sweeping success by the Italians was lost"[30].

Santoro flatly stated that he did not recall nor had he found trace of any *Superaereo* documentation of that conflict, and contested that the final resolution had been determined by the fact that "*it seemed intolerable to the Italo-German aviation to be put in second place*"[31]. It is certain that this crisis did not seem to occur at the top level at all. It is however possible that the friction was present in the communications between the various operations offices.

Supermarina considered the operation a victory, for which a good part of the credit went to the extremely high yield offered by the mass engagement of Italian insidious naval assault craft. Santoro admitted, at the end of the war, that the results accomplished by the Italian aviation were "*modest and in any case not proportionate to the means employed, to the engagement of the crews, to the losses suffered*" for a number of causes of various types[32].

Admiral Weichold remained very embittered. He fought with Kesselring, claiming that he was in favour of naval intervention in all cases and expressing the opinion that, otherwise, the opportunity to completely destroy the largest convoy ever directed to Malta would turn to smoke. But the head of the OBS did not accept the proposal nor did he allow the Italian fleet the protection from fighter planes.

> "To understand Kesselring's point of view", Weichold explained, "it has to be said that in the end he did not believe in the tactical success of the Italian cruisers. The failure of the second battle of Sirte, where a division of heavy Italian cruisers was not able to prevail over five small British cruisers, and the scant results achieved by the group of Italian

[30] MARCANTONIO BRAGADIN, *Il dramma della Marina italiana*, Milan, Mondadori, 1982, pp. 217-218.

[31] G. SANTORO, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 417.

cruisers in the Pantelleria fight, had influenced the opinion of the *Luftwaffe*. The Chief of Staff of the Italian Navy depended on the decisions of superiors: Mussolini, called on the telephone by Cavallero, did not feel he put himself in open conflict with Kesselring by deciding for the engagement of the fleet. Besides, the Navy General Staff did not want to assume the responsibility of using cruisers without the support of the *Luftwaffe*, and so the continuation of the naval operation underway was interrupted (...). The Italo-German airplanes, whose support in favour of the Italian Navy had been refused, were, however, able to only sink two transports"[33].

Let's now go back to North Africa to summarise, first, the new organisation of *Superlibia* and then the logistic situation in the middle of August.

Three distinct organisations were dependent on the High Command, whose functions, although pre-eminently for the occupied zone behind the front, extended to the operational field, not only for the incursions of the *Long Range Desert Group* and the *ad hoc* mobile columns, but also for threats coming from Tibesti and Cufra, and for any possible political-military changes in French North Africa.

The Tripolitania Defence Headquarters (General Armando) included the Tripoli stronghold (General Mannerini) and the Zuara, Garian, Homs and Sirtirco sectors and had about 24,000 men available. The Cirenaica Defence Headquarters (General Ivaldi) included the Bengasi stronghold (General Zarri) and the Agebadia-Gialo, Barce, Derna, Tobruk and Giarabub-Siwa sectors and had 14,000 men available. The Sahara Military Headquarters (Colonel Piatti del Pozzo), that beginning 1 September would pass under the jurisdiction of the Tripolitania Defence Headquarters, held the Hon, Sebha and Gat sectors with 5,000 men. In total, including the military and police forces, *Superlibia* had 43,000 available men, of whom 12,500 Libyan.

The logistic situation was anything but comforting and the heart of the problem consisted in the absence of an adequate reserve margin of materials in Libya, which is to say, enough of a level of autonomy to support the known uncertainty of the maritime transports, the losses due to air raids and other unforeseen events in the operational situation. Since the beginning of the war, routine supplies had always been inferior to consumption, except in rare exceptional moments, so that availabilities were

[33] See also G. FIORAVANZO, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

gradually decreasing in a worrying way. At that time, it was calculated that only a third of the ships could reach the Libyan ports. The most critical "items" regarded vehicles, fuel, munitions and flour.

Vehicles seemed to represent an unsolvable problem. At the end of July the large units were lacking in about 2,000 vehicles compared to the organization chart, studied to transport *only the materials* of the North Africa type 42 infantry divisions on wheels. So, the Italian infantrymen not only had to go on foot, but drag almost all of the 20 mm and 47/32 guns behind them and backpack the mortars and machineguns. The *Ariete, Littorio* and *Trieste* Divisions were forced to leave a third of their force on the ground, infantry and services in particular.

Indeed, the High Command had a regimental level transport unit but, after the assignment of an entire transport battalion (300 vehicles) to the Germans, it was reduced to a few hundred vehicles that continued to diminish because of extreme wear and tear. The Logistic Headquarters also formed a transport unit for itself for the logistic manoeuvre, selfishly drawing from the divisions despite the protests of the Headquarters. They were vehicles worn-out prematurely by too intense use in the worst environmental conditions. Furthermore, it had, and this was the backbone of its efficiency, a mass of a thousand civilian vehicles, all large capacity, and almost all equipped with a tow, with which it confronted the needs of the so-called "line service", or in other words the long distance transports on the Balbia Way.

The progression of 3rd and 4th degree repairs was not satisfying either, because the yield of the garages was not able to match the number of inefficient vehicles that came in. The Logistic Headquarters had four motor vehicle pools that were well-staffed and well-equipped as compared to the whole organization chart, but the number of damaged vehicles continued to grow. The main reasons were to be found in the exceptional use deriving from the constant engagement of the vehicles and the lack of regular maintenance; from the lack of spare parts; from the large and rapid movements of the front which ended up putting the pools in crisis for several days and that caused large losses of materials; not to mention the air raids (fragments that perforated engines, tanks, tyres).

As for fuel, to have an idea of the consumption, it is enough to keep in mind that for an army corps in halt and in conditions of operational stasis, the movement of vehicles was calculated to be about 2,000 kilometres a day for the requirements of reconnaissance, links, supplying, etc. The overall consumption was thus around 600 tons a day in a normal period and

reached 1,000 tons a day in the moments of the most intense operational activity. An autonomy of 1,000 kilometres with an addition of 500 kilometres "as intangible reserve" of fuel was provided. It was very little indeed for that type of war and the interruption in the flow of routine supplies for a few days was enough to put the army corps into a serious crisis.

Nor was the munitions situation getting much better, since the fighting in July had caused much more relevant consumption than the preceding period. So the stores of some calibres of artillery had gone below one *unfoc* (daily consumption rate on the average, from 100 to 150 shots per gun).

Finally, the limited availability of flour had brought about moments of great anxiety and forced the reduction of bread rations to the troops more than once, resorting to the biscuits from the dry rations which were rotten more often than not. It should also be added that it was also necessary to think about the civilian population, Libya being far from self-sufficiency where food was concerned. It is true that, immediately after the armistice with France, a civilian authority was created called *Acoguerra* (provisioning and coordination of war economy) for the needs of the population; but this authority suffered the same difficulties as the High Command and ended up depending on the military administration, and so aggravated the already difficult situation in which the Logistic Headquarters struggled.

The Supreme Command weighed up the situation again at the end of July. The supply plan for Libya, prepared at the end of March, provided for a monthly shipment of 75,000 tons of materials, the quantity considered indispensable to guarantee the feeding of the Italo-German troops and to establish autonomy of at least two months. In the May-July trimester the supplies (excluding fuel, tanks and vehicles) had reached the following figures:

Transported tonnage

Month	To Tripoli	To Bengasi	Total	Steamers utilised
May	60,400	27,800	88,200	30
June	20,000	4,200	24,200	7
July	14,800	30,200	45,000	14

The traffic to Tobruk is not considered in this table because no cargo steamers were sent in July, except for a few German personnel transports, some water-supply ships, submarines and coastal transports.

To assure an average of 75,000 tons per month, 22-24 steamer transports were necessary. The Port of Bengasi could only absorb units of rela-

tively limited tonnage and Tobruk was used by the Germans for the arrival of their incoming troops. That premised, the Supreme Command decided to involve *Supermarina* and the High Transport Administrative Department to *"also intensify the transports to Tripoli carried out in the months of June and July by at least doubling them"*. Nevertheless, in August the High Command reported a worrying situation. From 25 May, with the beginning of the Ain el-Gazala battle, to 10 August the provisions of victuals and munitions to Libya were nearly cut in *half* and those of fuel were reduced to *a little more than a quarter.*

No wonder that, also due to the arrival of new units in Africa such as the *Folgore* and *Pistoia* Infantry Divisions, they could not help cutting into the routine consumptions.

The High Command was not very convinced of the thing, but had to admit that *"the possibilities of shipping munitions are, at most, just sufficient to cover the consumption and to this it must be added that it is not always possible to send the assigned monthly quantities due to tonnage deficiencies"*, and, obviously, this apart from the losses due to sinking[34]. Two weeks later, after doing the accounts again, Rome ascertained that not only did the total materials sent to Libya in the first half of August amount to just 15,000 tons, but another 24,000 tons of routine supplies remained to be brought overseas from the month of July, not including fuel. In this regard, it is not a bad idea to stress that the reference to the magnitude of the tonnage sent could raise questions. For example, when it was not specified, that tonnage also included vehicles and armoured vehicles. And, when not transported in tankers, the amount of fuel that figured in cargo shipments also comprised the weight of the drums.

The resolution of the Supreme Command fixed itself on relatively obvious points: keep shipments to Tobruk and Bengasi at maximum levels; plan 25-35,000 tons of materials and vehicles per month for Tripoli; limit the shipment of vehicles to a maximum of 140 per motor ship, in order to reserve at least 3,000 tons to goods, munitions and various materials; increase the use of tankers. The sending of seven steamers to Tripoli, eight motor ships, thirteen cargo steamers and four troop transports to Bengasi and Tobruk was arranged for the second half of August, for a total of 50,000 tons, not including fuel.

The matter was even more complex for petrol and diesel. First of all,

[34] DSCS, note relevant to ph. 13156/Serv. dated 15/8/1942 by the CSFAAS.

it was necessary to subtract the consumption deriving from transport by routine means to El Daba from the amounts that disembarked in Tripoli, while the contributions were halved with Bengasi. And naturally, you had to count the return trip. Then the calculations were made on the basis of an average consumption of 80 tons per day for aviation fuel, 135 tons for autos and 160 tons for diesel fuel, equalling a need of 30,000 tons per month. Without taking these estimates into account and not knowing whether they included the need for transport from the port of embarkation to the front and losses for war events, the situation gave Libya autonomy until 26 August for aviation fuel, until 23 August for auto fuel and until 9 September for diesel. With supplies available on 16 August that autonomy would be extended until the beginning of October for petrol and 10 October for diesel. Needless to say, this was true if the amounts sent were to arrive in Libya intact.

Naturally, the most attention was given to the armoured vehicles. The XX Corps reported 117 efficient medium tanks on 5 August and 38 to be recovered within a week; 14 efficient L6 tanks and 17 recoverable in a few days; 17 efficient armoured cars plus 11 reparable within nine days. Then, given that the flow from Italy was consistent, it was calculated that 310 medium tanks, 50 light tanks, 80 armoured cars and 25 75/18 self-propelled guns could be put into line by 20 August. On the same date, the DAK had 117 tanks of all types available, among which 47 Pzkw III type J and 15 Pzkw IV type J, and it was thought that about 250 tanks could be deployed by the 20th. On the opposite side, the extent of armoured vehicles of the 8th British Army was estimated by the High Command to be equivalent to 150 tanks and 75 armoured cars at the front, plus 300 tanks and 60 armoured cars on their way.

The replenishing of personnel was another sore point. The overall scale of losses suffered by the AIT (dead, wounded and missing) from 26 May to 31 July was 15,070 Italians and 12,500 Germans, losses not compensated by the reserves that arrived in July (about 3,400 men for the major Italian formations), nor by the rate of new troops arriving as reinforcement alone (about 2,676 men from the *Folgore* and 2,064 from the *Pistoia*). Between 3 and 20 August, the Italian Army General Staff, with the aim of getting the army corps in Egypt ready, ordered the preparation of the following units: seven infantry battalions, three *bersaglieri* ones and one of *Giovani Fascisti*; eight tank companies; three 75/27 towed artillery groups, four 100/17 towed groups, a 75/18 self-propelled, a sapper battalion, a signal one and two telegraph companies; and, furthermore, the establishment of seven replacement infantry battalions and three

bersaglieri, and ten replacement artillery battery units by the end of August[35].

Other units were ready to be sent overseas, among which the engineer battalions of the *Littorio* and the *Giovani Fascisti*, and an additional 500 trucks with drivers. Where the settlement of losses and sending of troops were concerned, Italy did not have big problems, except for two of fundamental importance: the hasty mobilization led to insufficient training[36] and having the units ready in Italy did not mean they were already overseas. Very little, in fact, of what the High Command had requested departed for Libya during the summer and beginning of autumn. Although one cannot doubt the good will and industriousness of the Central Authority, it would be difficult to state that the organisational efficiency was equal to the effort[37].

As for the rest, too many decisions appeared to have been made on impulse and were put into effect with more disorder than rapidity. The deployment of the *Folgore* in Egypt could constitute an example. The Paratrooper Division (this was its original denomination) was transferred to Puglia at the end of June to complete its training in view of the operation on Malta. In the second half of July, it suddenly received the order to move to Africa, without specifying the task it was earmarked for. The per-

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[35] On 22 July the High Command had submitted a minimal plan for reorganising the major formations in line to the High Command, asking for the new constitution of the following whole units: four battalions and three 100/17 groups for the *Pavia*; two battalions and three 75/27 for the *Brescia*; two battalions and a self-propelled group for the *Trieste*; one battalion and a 100/17 group for the *Bologna*; a 100/17 group for the *Trento*, three self-propelled groups for the *Ariete* and the *Littorio*, two battalions for the 9th *Bersaglieri* and one for the 7th. Overall, 6,500 infantrymen and 6,000 artillerymen, to be air-transported, while the material could be sent by cargo ships. Taking into account a flow of 300 men a day, it would have taken 40 days from the start of the departures from Italy.

Furthermore, the High Command had asked for 24,000 reservists. But in practical terms very little of all this reached Libya.

[36] To remedy in some way the disadvantages of unpreparedness and lack of amalgamation, the High Command had established special training centres (one for infantry, one for tankmen, one for artillery and one for engineers) for carrying out brief but intense training cycles specially oriented for combat in Africa. Furthermore, courses for officers, non-commissioned officers, and specialists were carried out, and in such a way the most obvious gaps were filled.

[37] In the category of "hitches" that took place, you could cite a letter sent by the High Command to the Supreme Command on *9 August* as an example. In it Barbasetti recalled that the previous *6 April* he had asked for just the personnel for two 100/17 groups (one for the 3rd *Celere* and one for the 250th Artillery of the *Bologna*). This personnel "*is now flowing from the motherland*", Barbasetti communicated. Nevertheless, the consequent losses in the battle of Ain el Ghazala, the taking of Tobruk and the first battle of El Alamein had rendered the employment of all available material inevitable for the establishment of the two groups in question (24 100/17 howitzers, group and battery equipment, motor vehicles). The result: "*Before long, then, we shall have, in North Africa, all the personnel for two 100 groups without having the pieces, the motor vehicles and other necessary materials*" (DSCSAS, ph. 03/10378 O.M. dated 9/8/1942).

sonnel left by plane from the airports in Lecce and Tatoi (Athens) with their armament, individual equipment and parachutes, crew-served weapons and individual food rationing and ammunition. The heaviest materials and vehicles left from Brindisi by sea. The special jumping material that had to be transported by Navy craft was held back in Italy, when part of the division was already at El Alamein, due to the decision to employ this elite formation as common infantry.

The hasty departure, the lack of orientation about future tasks, and the diffused idea of an employment involving a parachuting action did not allow enough time for asking for or distributing what would be useful for life in the desert. The transfer was very slow so that the division, though having begun to move out in the middle of July, was joined by its last units on 6 August. The materials and vehicles that landed at Bengasi only partially arrived on the line (because shares were re-routed to other units or got lost) and not until mid-September, contributing to making life for the division even more difficult. Perhaps, it would have been possible to allow the *Folgore* to deploy more organically in the field.

The second aspect of the replenishment of personnel regarded the question of rotations and leaves. All of the large unit commanders appeared to be in agreement in pointing out the urgent need for adopting resolute measures, since there were serious repercussions that weighed very heavily on the morale and bodies of the men. All the more so, knowing that the Germans were rotated out after a year. Such unequal treatment contributed even more to putting the Italian soldier in an inferior position compared with the German allies, especially considering that even the difficulties in air and sea transport were overcome for them.

Nor, objectively, was it easy to alternate the troops at the line in shifts for rest in the zone behind the line, given the precarious availability of the forces. Even in the few cases of temporary withdrawal of units from the front line, they could not benefit from any real rest, as they were always engaged in tasks connected with operations, such as protection for supply lines, mopping-up of infiltrated enemy rapid units, work on rear positions, etc. De Stefanis wrote:

> It is essential to decide on the necessary measures to take as soon as the operational halt permits. This will allow us to prevent serious deficiencies. Do not forget that our soldier is very clever and makes comparisons with how their German *camerati* [comrades] are treated (...). Incidents should be avoided like those that took place in the 1915-1918 war with the troops from the *Sassari* Brigade, for example, and the con-

viction that the only liberation for them is death, serious injury or prison, at this point, must be taken out of the survivor's mind. These are expressions that, unfortunately, I have heard with my own ears and that have come from more than one source".

In short, it could be affirmed that on the eve of the battle of Alam el Halfa the morale of the Italian troops had fallen in tone compared with that it had reached at the El Alamein line.

Rommel only knew as much about this picture as he had in view. However, he was satisfied with having cut the British ambitions short at the end of July, with the consolidation at the front and with the flow of divisions, reserves and materials. This explains the optimistic tone of an exchange had with Kesselring[38] and, above all, of a meeting with Barbasetti (10 August), in the course of which he stated that he was *"satisfied in general"* because *"the serious crisis of the second half of July had been overcome"*. The line was sturdy by then and the AIT Headquarters had finally been able to pull back almost all of the armoured and motorized troops in reserve, and to confer depth to the disposition by making large mined pockets, flanked by sturdy strongholds and protected on their front side. Almost half of the infantry battalions were in the second line of the strongholds.

Rommel observed that the situation also appeared in a favourable light considering the situation of armoured troops. Although the quantities were more or less the same as the enemy, quality was on the DAK's side: each *Panzer* was worth three enemy tanks. The same could be said for the artillery, given the superiority of the heavy German battery (150 mm cannons and 210 mm howitzers), although still remaining unsatisfactory in anti-tank weapons and lacking munitions and the means for transporting them. The notes were also positive for aviation, apart from the scarcity of fuel. The force ratio would have to improve with the promised arrival of other vehicles from Germany, among which 200 tanks, but it was doubtful that they would arrive in time for the resumption of the offensive.

In synthesis, Rommel looked *"at the near future with full confidence"*. In the eventuality of a British offensive, possible in short time in the northern sector of the front, the formation offered ample guarantee for being able to bear the brunt of the attack. In the case of the imminent Italo-German

[38] On 10 August Rommel wrote in his diary: *"Kesselring was here yesterday. We found ourselves in agreement about the future. Now it is about using [these] few weeks to the fullest to get ready. The situation is changing day by day to my advantage"* (B. LIDDEL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 263).

offensive *"the probability of success is considerable"*. Obviously, it was necessary to complete every effort to strengthen the army.

Having examined numerous issues connected with this strengthening, Rommel went on to the operational intentions:

> "Marshal Rommel", Barbasetti reported, "feels it is necessary to carry out the offensive before the enemy receives the large convoys that are on their way and before they lay mine fields, which may soon create prohibitive conditions to a quick and resolute action.
> On the other hand, it is necessary, among other things, to wait until at least part of the reinforcements already sent to Africa and the petrol for aviation have reached us.
> Among these opposing needs, and keeping in mind the agreements reached with Marshal Kesselring, it has been established that the attack will take place, barring any unforeseen events, around 26 August (between the 24th and the 28th), in a full moon, in order to be able to begin and efficiently continue night operations".

The manoeuvre plan was based on surprise, so artillery preparation and air force strikes were cancelled. On the whole front the infantry units had to launch three big surprise attacks, well-supported by artillery, intended to engage the bulk of the enemy and possibly attract a response from the British armoured units. The extent of these sector actions had to be such as not to compromise the solidity of the defensive disposition. Units of the *Trento* and the 164th German Infantry Division would operate to the north; units of the *Brescia* and the *Ramcke* Paratrooper Brigade to the centre; and units of the *Folgore* to the south.

In the meantime, the bulk of the manoeuvre would start the advance leaving from the assembly area south of Deir el Qattara, gradually taking on a formation from west to east, front to the north and then executing a large conversion to the left until cutting into the coastal road and closing the bulk of the adversary in a large pocket. In brief, it was a repetition of the Ain El Ghazala battle plan, hopefully without leaving behind another Bir Hacheim.

> "At this point", Barbasetti continued, "the battle will be conducted with the aim of destroying the enemy forces. And it will, therefore, definitely proceed east, to cut the road between Alexandria and Cairo. Further developments are not foreseeable at the moment. This is what Marshal Rommel said, who appears extremely confident in success".

The meeting ended very cordially. Rommel said that he liked the new organisation of command in Africa, confessed that the days in the middle of July "*were the ugliest and most tormented in his military life, the most full of anxiety and moral depression*", and admitted that, thanks to the help provided to him by the Supreme Command and the High Command, his faith, "*has gradually recovered and returned to the level of the great days of Tobruk and Marsa Matruk*"[39].

When the synthesis of the meeting reached Rome, it gave Cavallero a start. What was the meaning of "*it was established that the attack would take place around 26 August, if no unforeseen events arise?*" He spoke to von Rintelen expressing the intention of remonstrating[40]. Already two days before, he had demonstrated a lively disapproval, also to von Rintelen, of the *directives* issued by Kesselring to Rommel regarding the eventual resumption of operations in Egypt. As much as he agreed with the idea of beating the British in time, he could not allow that others arrive at conclusions that were not in their capacity. "*We are dealing with subjects that need to be decided by the Supreme Command*", he had said[41]. Then he decided to go to Africa.

He arrived in Derna on 16 August, after a brief layover in Taormina, at the headquarters of the OBS, to make brief contact with Kesselring and Fougier. The next day, having made various aspects of the organisation of command clear and examined the logistic predispositions with Bastico, Barbasetti and von Rintelen, he gave the directives for Rommel about the advance to the Delta and successively to the Suez Canal. In these he confirmed the validity of the directives from 26 June first of all[42], then touched on salient points of the operation. The departure base was represented by the positions held at the moment, which had to remain garrisoned for any eventuality. The task translated into *beating* the British forces drawn up west of the Delta. The first objective was Alexandria, also with the aim of at least

[39] DSCSAS, ph. 01/16663/Op. dated 14/8/1942.

[40] Cavallero did not indicate who he wanted to take it out on, but it is clear that the statement was made with intention, so that von Rintelen referred it to Rommel.

[41] Cavallero's diary, dated 13/8/1942. The day before Cavallero had advanced to Rommel that the AIT, starting the 16th, would pass under the direct subordination of the Supreme Command. Then, when the rear margin of the army's area of jurisdiction on the Matruh-Siwa alignment was established, he had warned: "*The Duce confirms the general directives in act and adds that the formation and all the predispositions, including the logistic ones, must correspond with a diligent completion of the preparations underway for the resumption [of the offensive]. The moment for this resumption will be established by the Duce*" (DSCS ph. 32000/Op. dated 12/8/1942).

[42] DSCS, *cit.*, ph. 3100/Op. dated 1942.

partially utilising that port for supplying the further push towards Cairo. The successive objectives were the region of Cairo and the Suez Canal.

> "The Italo-German Army", he assured, "will have a number of forces and vehicles at its disposal within a few days that will allow it to victoriously face the enemy. The greatest effort is being made to compensate for those deficiencies that have existed until now in terms of fuel and munitions. A limited number of vehicles could still flow in this month for the Italian units in the army.
> In the same way, supplies are being provided to German and Italian aviation. Arrangements are underway to assure the successive supplying of the advance. Preparations are also being made on the part of *Delease* for the materials necessary to cross the Nile (...)".

And in the end he concluded:

> "The date for beginning the operation is necessarily subject to the condition that the plan underway for the transport of supplies, especially fuel, does not undergo halts or is drastically reduced in a significant way. It is desirable for the action to develop as soon as possible. I shall submit the date you have proposed to the Duce's approval"[43].

On 18 August the directives were shown to Rommel by Cavallero personally in the presence of Kesselring at the AIT Headquarters. Drafts from the meeting do not exist, but the discussion could not have been carried out in a very agreeable climate. Rommel returned to dark pessimism. He was critical of the Italian logistic organisation[44] and did not hesitate to show a notable lack of confidence in the possibility of bringing the offensive to a positive outcome. There were still 14,500 men missing from the German units (of whom 2,500 non-commissioned officers), 210 tanks, 195 anti-tank guns and 1,400 vehicles. The XX Italian Corps, which had to be one of the protagonists in the battle, was capable of transporting just four of its ten battalions. Moreover, of the 220 tanks it had available, a well-founded prediction existed that more than half would stop in the desert for mechanical problems or for the poor training of the drivers. As for fuel and ammunition, the levels resulted as being dramatically insufficient and the supplies from Italy proceeded slowly. First, there was the interruption caused by Operation

[43] DSCS, ph. 300 dated 17/8/1942.
[44] See also E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-217.

Pedestal. Then on the 15th the seventh rapid motor ship was lost in little more than two months. Then the day before, British air-torpedo attacks on the *Pilo* convoy near the Kerkennah islands and submarine attacks on the *Bixio* convoy on the eastern route had caused the sinking of another motor ship and done serious damage to a steamer. It is clear that all this contributed to generating an atmosphere of uncertainty and pessimism, which was the worst possible thing that could have happened in that moment.

Cavallero guaranteed that the Supreme Command would make the necessary things arrive at the right time and underlined the importance of fine-tuning the logistics, stating that "*we are fighting the first battle on the sea to flow supplies, after which the glorious and difficult German action will take place!*"[45]. Kesselring, from his corner, assured that the *Luftwaffe* would allow for the flow of supplies to Libya and, if need be, the transport of 500 tons a day by air. It seems that Rommel remained very sceptical, but in the end shrugged his shoulders saying that he would attack if and when he received the indispensable[46].

Yet the seeds of doubt had started to stir and that very night General Magli, of the Supreme Command, informed Cavallero that

> "the situation leads *Supermarina* to think the route for Tripoli is temporarily closed (therefore *Pozarica* ship will not be sent to Tripoli) and to suspend shipments by the eastern route for two or three days, in order to exercise intense pursuit of submarines and to muster a strong escort for the shipment of a fuel convoy"[47].

Back in Rome, Cavallero tried to square the maritime transport accounts in every way, but without much result, also due to the deficiency in diesel for the Navy. The minimum monthly consumption was around 75,000 tons, while 50,000 tons came from Romania, the principle source, and 10,000 tons came from Germany, all theoretical figures, especially for the German supplies. If you were to consider that of the 75,000 tons of requirements, 51%

[45] Cavallero's diary, dated 18/8/1942.

[46] See also G. MANCINELLI, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159, and E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-217.

[47] DSCS, telegram 32076/Op. dated 18/8/1942, 21:00 hours, addressed to *Delease* for Marshal Cavallero. The decision was made in the meeting about transports held at the Supreme Command that morning. In those headquarters Admiral Weichold had expressed the opinion that suspending traffic for three days would come to nothing in that it would not make the British submarines disappear, and instead he had asked to *"insist at all costs"* on the shipment of supplies to Libya. Admiral Sansonetti had closed the discussion objecting that the escort units were insufficient and that the lost ships could not be replaced.

was reserved for convoy escorts and 13% for the merchant ships used for supplies to Africa, you can see that almost the entire total of the 60,000 tons of Romanian and German diesel was alloted simply to traffic.

On the other hand, it was also necessary to keep in mind the unyielding local general consumption and this inevitably led to a reduction in the escorts, not to mention even taking diesel from the cruisers, paralysing the activity of the naval squad even more. On 19 August, the situation had become so critical that it provoked an intervention by Rommel, concise as usual, at the Supreme Command:

> "After thorough examination of all the forecasts and necessities for the planned undertaking, it is confirmed that the needs set forth in the conversation on the 18th must be considered as *minimum*. Moreover, it is necessary to transport the recently assigned *Pistoia* Division behind the Alamein front during offensive operations at least as a mobile reserve. Vigorous adversary counterattacks must be counted on against the north wing during the offensive. Mobile forces for the defence cannot be detached from the troops currently available"[48].

On the basis of this, von Rintelen, who had brought the message in question to Cavallero, felt obligated to propose the renunciation of the arranged offensive, seeing as how the German ground and air forces in Africa had 8,000 tons of fuel available in all versus the 30,000 tons deemed indispensable. Kesselring, also present at the meeting, admitted that starting an operation of that sort in those conditions would be too risky. The sinking of a tanker could have immobilised the German armoured units in the desert.

Confronted with such a position and, as if that were not enough, the news that the *H Force* had set sail from Gibraltar with three battleships, two aircraft carriers, various torpedo-boat destroyers and seventeen cargo ships, Cavallero asked Rommel to postpone the offensive to the 30th-31st of the month, but Kesselring answered in the negative. Cavallero stood firm and illustrated the plan for convoys to put in effect by 28 August, with precedence given to the transport of fuels:

> 1st convoy: the tanker, *Pozarica,* (7,000 tons of fuel, of which 1,000 for the Germans) and the steamer, *Istria,* headed for Bengasi;

[48] DSCS, telegram w/o no. dated 19/8/1942, 10:05 hours, by the AIT Headquarters, addressed to General von Rintelen.

2nd convoy: the tankers, *Alberto Fassio* (2,800 tons of fuel for the Germans) and *Abruzzi,* (500 tons of petrol) and the steamers, *Delphi* (470 tons of petrol for the Germans) and *Kreta* headed for Tobruk;
3rd convoy: the motor ships, *Unione* and *Manara,* headed for Bengasi;
4th convoy: the tanker, *S. Giorgio,* (2,400 tons of fuel for the Germans plus about a thousand drums of petrol and lubricant) and eventually the tanker, *S. Andrea* (4,000 tons of petrol), not to mention the steamers, *Camperio* and *Tergestea,* for Tobruk;
5th convoy: the steamers, *Ruhr* and *Amsterdam,* for Tripoli or Bengasi.

After a short debate, the conclusion, shared by all, was that the measures taken appeared sufficient for the *"preparation of the offensive"*. As for the successive supply, it all depended on the availability of diesel, something that necessitated a separate study. In other words, before deciding on the start of the operation, it was necessary to find a solution to the diesel problem.

Another message from Rommel arrived at the Supreme Command on 21 August, also about supplies. Cavallero answered with two telegrams. In the first, he essentially reminded him of the extremely serious difficulties with maritime transports, also due to the very recent losses of ships, and he tried to instill confidence, confirming that *"the greatest effort is being made to transport what is still lacking to Africa, especially fuel and ammunition"*. In the second dispatch he clung to the operational level:

"1. On the whole, the Duce approves the date you proposed for the operation in line with the directives given on 17 August.
2. The Duce has confirmed orders so that measures underway for flow of supplies are intensified to the maximum.
3. Communicate your definite intentions as soon as possible"[49].

Rommel's response was very precise. The offensive would begin if the following conditions were fulfilled:

a. the first three convoys with 2,000 tons of fuel and 500 tons of munitions have to arrive in Tobruk and Bengasi by the 25th;
b. the fourth convoy has to arrive in Tobruk by the 27th;
c. the vehicles necessary for motorising six battalions and five battery groups of the XX Corps have to arrive at the front by the 27th, together with the materials for supplying the *Folgore;*

[49] DSCS, telegram 32103/Op. dated 21/8/1942.

d. guarantee that another 3,600 tons of fuel and 2,000 tons of munitions arrive in Tobruk and Bengasi by the 30th.

In the case that these conditions were not reached, the plan, studied for use during the period of the full moon, would fall apart and the offensive would have to be postponed and, obviously, laid on other foundations. Moreover, the enemy would be strongly reinforced in September and, as a consequence, the AIT would not only need a total completion but a reinforcement of new German troops as well. This was aside from the possibility that the enemy would move in the meantime.

23 and 24 August were frenetic days. The information about the H Force leaving Gibraltar proving false, Cavallero, Riccardi, Santoro, Kesselring and Weichold dedicated themselves feverishly to trying to find a solution. Flipping through Cavallero's diary one cannot shake off the oppressive pall caused by the laboured research into how to bring a few thousand tons of materials to the other side of the Mediterranean to *begin* - please note - just to begin the offensive[51]. And it already seemed a victory being able to have these few tons *leave*, even knowing that Bengasi was more than a thousand kilometres from the front and that Tobruk itself, Rommel's most important port, was still at a distance of 500 kilometres from the AIT and, furthermore, subject to continuous air raids at night, which devastated the port and the ships laid over there[52]. All of the measures for protecting the convoys were studied. The cruisers were partially emptied. They bet on speed and on the routes and... no one imagined that Rommel's desperate appeals and the reassuring responses given by the Supreme Command (through von Rintelen) and Kesselring, both precise in dates and data, were *read* by the enemy, who could comfortably start the hunt from one moment to the next and then, just as comfortably, control the results of the attacks with new *Ultra* decryptions.

On the 23rd the Supreme Command let Rommel know that the German units would be receiving 225 tons of fuel on 25 August; 2,470 of fuel and 242 of munitions on 28 August; 3,000 of fuel and 580 of munitions on 1 September and 1,000 of fuel and 1,650 of munitions on 4 September. Furthermore, 285 vehicles would land at Bengasi on the 28th and another

[50] DSCS, ph. 85 dated 22/8/1942, 20:35 hours.

[51] In August about 52,000 tons of materials of every kind actually arrived in Libya (including fuel and vehicles), of which 13,000 between 24 and 31 August. In the same month the enemy received 450 cannons, 390 tanks, 6,700 motor vehicles and 72,000 tons of other war material.

[52] In August, on average, 50 British bombers bombed Tobruk every night, the minor ports and ships en route (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, *op. cit.*, p. 379).

215 vehicles on 4 September for the Italian units. The requested materials for bridge construction would arrive between 2 and 4 September[53]. That day von Rintelen commented that "*we did everything possible*" and that the major worry was for the diesel. Cavallero answered gloomily that "*you live for the day and you cannot work with secure plans*", then stated confidently, "*but we will get there*"[54].

In the meantime a real bomb exploded. Rommel had been ill for a couple of weeks: low blood pressure, gastroenteritis, physical fatigue, state of anxiety, unbearable environmental conditions for his age and considering the stress he suffered. On 21 August, the Chief of the Army Staff, Gausè, forwarded a telegram to the OKW, with the knowledge of the doctor in charge, communicating that "*Field Marshal Rommel suffers from chronic gastroenteritis, nasal diphtheria and significant circulatory problems. He is not in a condition to lead the imminent offensive*". Cavallero was informed by von Rintelen the next day at 13:30. He wrote in his diary:

> "I am receiving General von Rintelen (...). Rommel requested his substitution from the OKW due to illness. Problems ensue. I ask if there are other motives. Von Rintelen thinks there are not. I ask whether Rommel will lead the offensive or not. If not, we will probably have to take the defensive.
> I demonstrate that a situation based on a single man does not work. Here are the consequences.
> Von Rintelen will telegraph the OKW asking for clarification. I insist on asking whether something was done to him on the Italian side. Von Rintelen assures that when speaking with Rommel he complained of feeling ill and that he is truly tired.
> I maintain that the situation is getting complicated and I hope it can be resolved for the best. I ask if they have a man capable of substituting him. Von Rintelen assures that this is so, but I say everything will have to change with such a substitution. I continue to have the impression that no one on the Italian side was lacking but, if I am wrong, measures will be taken. I dismiss him saying that I await clarification from the OKW".

Some words of comment are necessary. It is more than understandable that the mentioned loss of a commander of Rommel's calibre, especially

[53] DSCS, ph. 31132/Op. dated 23/8/1942.
[54] Cavallero's Diary dated 23/8/1942.

on the eve of the offensive that was planned with very restricted margins of success, should cause profound worry, but the sentence *"I demonstrate that a situation based on one man does not work. Here are the consequences"* does not make any sense. It would have made sense if Cavallero had added, *"It was exactly for such an eventuality that the Supreme Command wanted to assume the direct command of the AIT"*. And, in the same category, the sentence *"I ask if Rommel will lead the offensive or not"* demonstrates the flimsiness of the reasons adopted for the modification of the organisation of command in Africa. Then the interrogative *"if something was done to him by the Italian side"* and the intention of taking measures if it had happened is absolutely unacceptable.

As is natural, the subject took on primary importance. On the 23rd in the afternoon von Rintelen observed that, at that point, the offensive depended on the state of Rommel's health, while Kesselring seemed set on launching it anyway. Cavallero shrugged his shoulders, replying that the Supreme Command granted the requests and *"we shall suspend the action if a negative decision is made. It does not depend on us"*. Then, after a moment of reflection, he asked

> "whether it is the case that the decision about the offensive should be made by the Supreme Command. General von Rintelen answers that he does not believe it should assume a responsibility of this nature. Action is desirable, but it is not up to us to decide. I agree and say that, as a matter of fact, the Duce approved *on the whole*. He is personally involved and we must be extremely correct"[55].

It seems difficult to draw a similar attitude from the memorandum with which Mussolini was forced to modify the line of command!

Rommel was really ill, but probably his morale was also weighed down by the lack of confidence deriving from a situation of more than evident logistic uncertainty. In any case, on the one hand he strictly worried about indicating the preliminaries for the operation, on the other he thought about a substitute. He mentioned the name of General Guderian to the OKW, to whom he wrote directly, but the proposal was rejected. Guderian was not available for health reasons[56]. At first, Hitler opted for

[55] Cavallero's Diary dated 23/8/1942.

[56] Actually, General Guderian was still in disgrace. Commander of the 4th Army on the Russian front, he had had a violent conflict with Marshal von Kluge, his direct superior, following which he was relieved of his post and put on reserve.

General von Mackensen, but it turned out he was too busy on the Russian front. Seeing how Kesselring had let it be known that he was available, were it necessary, to take on the high leadership of the operation and entrust the handling of the battle to General Nehring, it was thus Kesselring that Hitler focused on.

For some days uncertainty ruled, as no one, in Rome or in Rastenburg, wanted to force the situation. It was Rommel to dispel the doubts[57]. On the 25th he asked Kesselring to come and visit him in Egypt and, in the meantime, he telegraphed the OKW that, in the doctor's opinion, he was able to retain command of the AIT for the imminent offensive under continuous medical observation. After, he would have to return to Germany. The OKW's response was immediate, "*The Führer has been informed and has consented that he [Rommel] take a long period of sick leave in Europe as soon as the situation has been defined in this theatre of operations*"[58].

On the 26th Barbasetti notified Cavallero of being summoned by Rommel for an examination of the arranged flow of supplies and to decide on the offensive. Kesselring, who was about to leave for Egypt, expressed the conviction that a postponement to the 30th seemed possible without there being any damage and he remained firm on the necessity to attack. In the afternoon, it was officially known that Rommel would stay at his post. The news was reassuring. As compensation, on the 27th in the morning, Cavallero read a disappointing telegram from Barbasetti, sent the night before after a visit to the AIT Headquarters:

> "In today's meeting the specialist (...) confirmed that the same conditions hold true for him. In these conditions he does not want to undertake the cure. It is his intention to wait until the second package of medicines of the four is actually delivered to which your paragraph 32130 of the 23rd refers and, when he has examined the quantity and types of medicines that have really arrived, he will make a judgement about the possible cure and about its beginning and progression"[59].

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[57] On 24 August Rommel wrote to his wife that he was a bit better and that *"I certainly won't leave my post until I can pass it into the hands of my successor without worries. It's still not known who it will be (...). At the pace with which we are wearing down the generals in Africa - five per division in eighteen months - it's no wonder that at a certain point I too would need a check-up"* (B. LIDDEL HART, *Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 270).

[58] Letter by Lieut. Berndt, the Marshal's Field Assistant, to Mrs. Rommel on the date of 26/8/1942 (*Ibid.*, p. 271).

[59] DSCS, telegram 306/Sit. dated 26/8/1942, 23:15 hours by *Delease*.

Some hours later a communication from Rommel came in. The arrival of the convoy estimated for the 27th would occur on the 28th or the 29th due to its late departure. "*As a consequence, any decision about the activation of the said operation will only be communicated on 29 August*", the telegram concluded.

Rommel's refusal to embark on an adventure was objectively justified. As he said to Barbasetti on the 26th, given the fuel and munitions situation at the moment, it was not possible to enter into battle. Without the availability in Marmarica or at least in Cirenaica of the indispensable for supplying the offensive, the alternatives came down to two: to give up the offensive, contenting oneself with the firm possession of the strait of El Alamein, Siwa and the coast (and avoiding a useless consumption of precious supplies) or, in the best of hypotheses, to launch an attack of limited objective, that is to give a shock to the British dispositions. The fact remained that, in having lost the opportunity of the full moon period underway and wanting to wait for the next, the problem grew more complicated. To beat a significantly reinforced enemy, the flow of other German divisions would become necessary.

Nor would the meeting with Kesselring improve things much. First of all, Kesselring found the organisation at Tobruk so unsatisfactory that it led him to ask Barbasetti for the immediate concentration of every power over the Italians and Germans in a single person (Admiral Lombardi). Then, speaking with Rommel, he seemed to demonstrate quite a different state of mind from that indicated by Cavallero in his diary:

> "Kesselring came today for a long conversation about our most pressing problem", Rommel wrote to his wife in the evening of the 27th. "He, among other things, has a difficult job in Rome. He gets a lot of promises, but few are kept. His great optimism towards those nefarious individuals has turned into bitter disappointment (...)"[60].

Accusing the Supreme Command of making assurances light-heartedly is certainly unfair; however, it is undeniable that too many organisational deficiencies could not but appear irritating and disappointing, especially in the eyes of the allies. It was unthinkable that a country at war for more than two years had not militarised the merchant navy, that the rhythm of the dockyards was more or less like that of peacetime, that they lacked harbour

[60] B. LIDDEL HART, *Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 272.

workers in Tobruk "*because the authorisation falls under the Ministry of the Corporations*" (as a furious Cavallero noted in his diary), etc.

Without going into particulars, we shall say that on 29 August the development of the plan for maritime transports manifested itself in the following data. The tanker, *Pozarica*, torpedoed in the afternoon of the 20th, was towed to the port of Egeo and its cargo recovered; the tankers, *Alberto Fassio* and *Giorgio,* arrived fortuitously in the port of Tobruk on the 28th, despite repeated air attacks; the ships, *Istria, Delphi* and *Camperio,* were sunk on the days of the 27th and the 28th; the *Tergestea* arrived in Bengasi on the 28th[61].

In spite of his wavering and opposition to the prospect of attacking, Rommel did not neglect the preparations. Not only that, but he even pushed himself as far as communicating to the commanders of the army corps the fundamental lines for the exploitation of success once the 8th Army had been defeated. The AIT would have moved articulating itself in three bodies of forces in the front line and two in the second (Sketch N. 20). The Bismarck Group with the 21st *Panzer* and the 164th Infantry Division had to overrun and occupy Alexandria; the DAK, together with the 15th *Panzer* and the 90th Light had the task of taking control of the bridges on the Nile near Cairo and occupying the city; between the two, the XX Army Corps, with the *Ariete*, *Littorio* and *Trieste*, had to carry out the elimination of the British defences on Wadi El Natrun, then occupy the bridges of the mid-Delta with the bulk sending a detachment to El Fayum to take the airport and local warehouses. In a second phase, the XXI Corps with the *Trento* and *Bologna* Infantry Divisions had to substitute the Bismarck Group in the occupation of Alexandria and make the two German divisions available; while the X Corps with the *Brescia*, *Pavia* and *Folgore* Infantry Divisions would replace the DAK, so as to allow it to pursue the penetration towards the Suez and Ismailia, and block the Nile valley north of Cairo[62].

Still in the afternoon of the 29th the AIT Headquarters communicated to the Supreme Command:

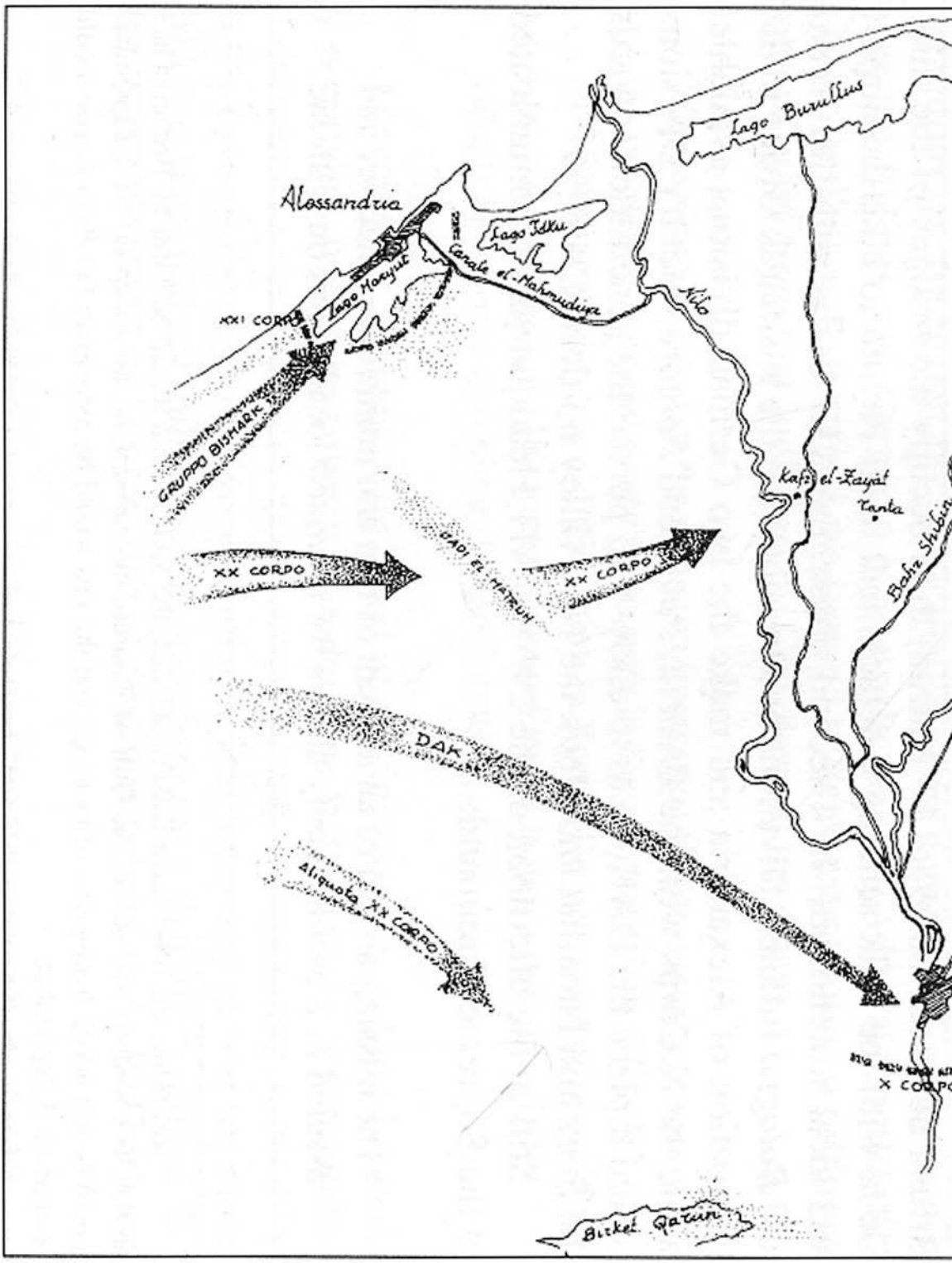
> "The missing arrival of an amount of fuel and munitions, asked for and assured as a premise, only allows for a limited local operation with the

[61] Regarding the other three tankers planned, the *Sant'Andrea* would be burnt by British planes on the 30th, while it was still in the Gulf of Taranto; the *Abruzzi*, hit by a torpedo on 1 September, would be left adrift, losing part of its cargo, but the rest would be recovered; the *Picci Fassio* would be sunk on 2 September.

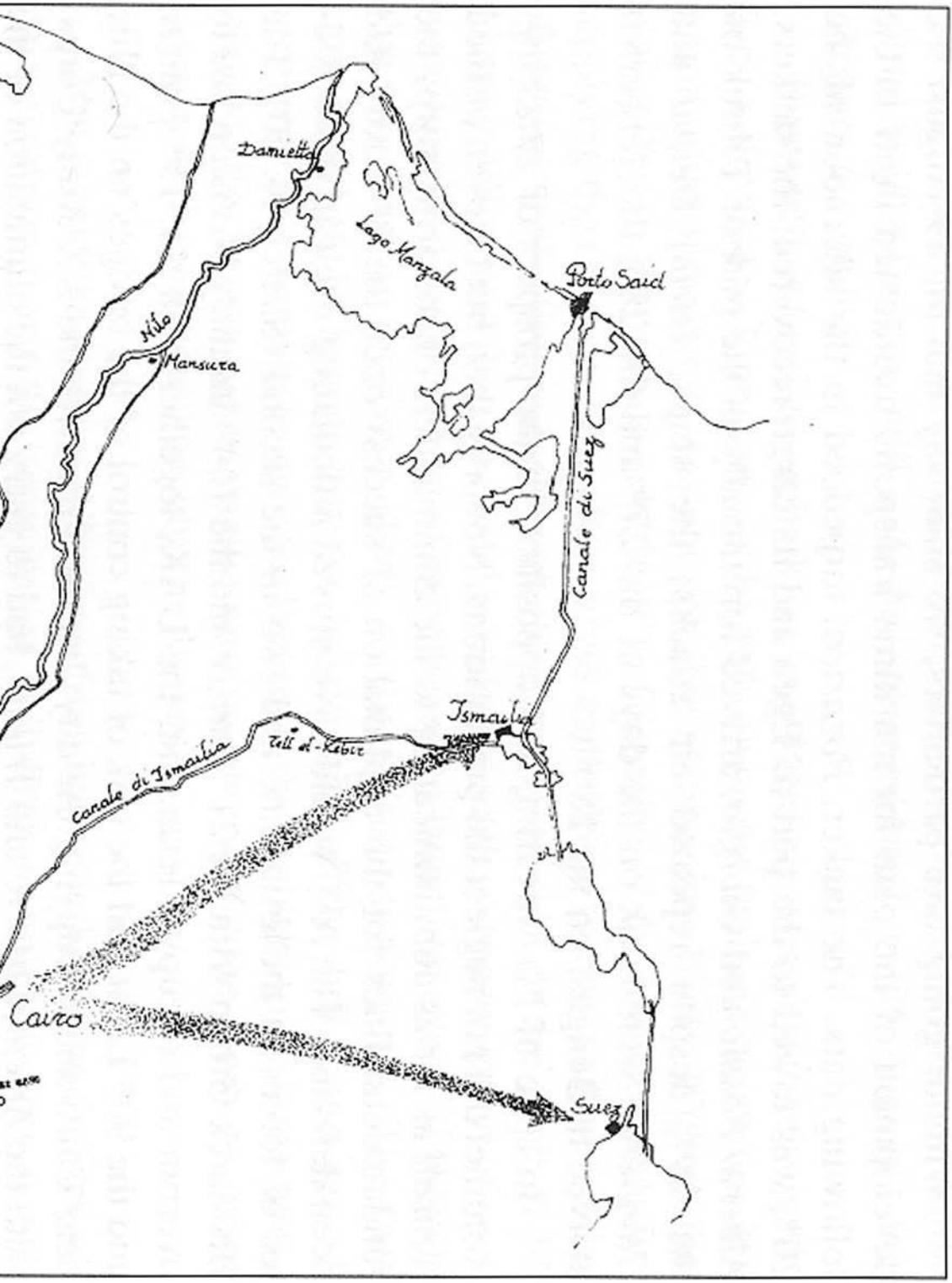
[62] DSCS, ph. 3963 dated 28/8/1942 by *Delease*.

Sketc

"ROMMEL'S PLAN FOR THE



ch N. 20
EXPLOITATION OF SUCCESS"



objective of defeating the enemy forces aligned on the Alamein positions.

Even this limited operation is only possible since the OBS has made 1,000 tons of fuel from its escorts available to the army to begin with, on loan.

The victorious execution of the aforementioned operation and the exploitation of an eventual overwhelming success rests on the arrival of the supplies requested with the communication of the 28th of this month (...) for the dates cited in it"[63].

But Rommel had already settled the matter once and for all. He saw Professor Horster, the doctor in charge, in the morning of the 30th as he was getting out of the vehicle in which he was sleeping and, with a worried expression, he said, "*Professor, the decision to attack today is the most serious that I have ever made. Either the army in Russia is able to advance on Grozny and we in Africa are able to reach the Canal or else..*". and he made a gesture of resigned defeat with his hand[64]. In the evening he wrote to his wife, "(...) *I accepted the risk, because it will be a long time before we have the conditions of the full moon so favourable again. As for me, I will give everything I have got to contribute to success*".

The tone was firm, although it showed fatigue and the knowledge of playing the decisive card in precarious conditions: not completely reliable reports on the force ratio (in the end, it would turn out clearly unfavourable); supplies to the limits of necessity and uncertain because they had to cross the Mediterranean and arrive at the front; lack of confidence in the Supreme Command and the OKW. The conditions for failure were all there.

3. The Battle of Alam el Halfa

Despite his pessimism, Rommel got to work as soon as Cavallero had left. On the 20th, he had a meeting with the corps commanders and displayed the manoeuvre plan for the imminent operation: envelop the enemy formations from south with the armoured forces and attack them from behind to destroy them. A positive outcome of the attack was essentially founded on quickness of movement which would allow them to come

[63] DSCS, telegram 104/Sec. dated 29/8/1942 by AIT Headquarters.

[64] Reported by Bayerlein, see also B. LIDDELL HART, *Rommel Papers*, *cit.*, p. 275.

down hard on the rear of the British static defences, devastate the zone behind the front line and impose a battle with the front backwards on the 8th Army, which, given the conditions of the crisis accomplished, would have led to victory even though the enemy had greater forces and equipment available.

To assure the surprise, the enveloping movement would be done at night, so as to make detection difficult and prevent the British from undertaking timely *ad hoc* measures. The divisions in the first rank would have to get past the Italo-German minefield (line of reference A), prepared on the Bab el Qattara - Qaret el Khadim - El Taqa alignment by 22:00 of day X; reach the departure base on the Deir el Muhafid - Deir el Tafa - Abd el Mawala line by 4:00 of day X+1; start the attack northwards at 5:00. Since then, it was clear that day X, which Rommel would indicate 30 hours before, would not fall before 28 August, as the movement of the manoeuvre units in the gathering zone had to be completed in four nights beginning the night of the 25th.

When the corps commanders illustrated the general outline of the operations to the division commanders, an important detail emerged: the underestimation of British defensive arrangements south of Alam Nayil. In the summary of a report held by De Stefanis in the morning of the 22nd he said: "*The success of the aforementioned night movement is subject to overcoming the initial resistance the enemy will be able to put up (...). The movement of the army corps would have to turn into a normal march of a logistic character, given that it is framed by the 90th Light to the north and the CTA to the south*"[65], and, evidently, De Stefanis's words reflected Rommel's thoughts.

On the 22nd the AIT Headquarters issued the operation order with an assessment of the enemy situation. The 30th Corps, still believed to be held in General Norrie's command, seemed to be in line with the 9th Australian and the 50th British between the sea and Ruweisat left out, with the 1st South African at the rear of the previous two and the rest of the 1st Tank Brigade in reserve. The 13th Corps, entrusted to General Lumsden from what appeared, had the 5th Indian, the 2nd New Zealand, the 7th and 1st Armoured Divisions at its disposal. The topographical map distributed as an attachment accurately pointed out the characteristics of the terrain noted down on the basis of British maps, aerial photographs and information collected among the Arabs, but left a lot of doubts about the detachment of the armoured and motorized brigades of the 13th Corps. For

[65] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps, dated 22/8/1942.

example, besides a couple of *unbekannt Verband* (unit unknown) indications, it put the 1st (rather than the 10th) Armoured Division between Ruweisat and Alam el Halfa, instead of south of the latter ridge. In short, apart from the names of the corps commanders, the wrong placement of the 5th Indian as a subunit of the 13th Corps and the wrong location of the 1st Armoured Division, the rest was more or less accurate. Let's now look at the details:

the 9th Australian Division: had suffered limited losses and could be considered the best division in the 8th Army;
the 50th British Division: already heavily beaten, its two brigades were probably re-constituted;
the 1st South African Division: re-constituted;
the 5th Indian Division: with two brigades that were not their own at first, it appeared of negligible value;
the 1st Armoured Division: probably brought back to level as for number of tanks and detached to the rear of the central portion of the front, it had to be considered for an intervention both north-westwards and southwards;
the 7th Armoured Division; aligned in the southern stretch of the front, it had the 7th Motor Brigade and another brigade available, which may have been the re-constituted 4th Armoured Brigade;
tanks: including those for the infantry and the light ones, the 8th Army could employ no less than 350-400 tanks.

The days of 23rd and 24th were spent by the divisional Headquarters on the plans for the transfer to the gathering zone and the beginning of the offensive. On the 25th the AIT Headquarters ordered the arrangement for the opening of the corridors through the friendly minefields.

On the 29th Rommel held another meeting. He drew attention to the absolute need for the armoured divisions to pursue the route during the night and reach the departure base by dawn at all costs. The circumstances that could have an unfavourable influence, he said, were three: the *Royal Air Force,* the probable fight with enemy ground forces, the limited cruising speed of the Axis columns.

The *Royal Air Force* incursions would be reduced by a powerful Axis aviation action on the British camps, so the Italo-German troops coming out of the friendly minefields would be noticed and also hindered, but not in a prohibitive way, especially considering the vastness of the zone. More than material damage, the psychological effects were to be taken into con-

sideration. It was necessary to rigorously avoid that, at the first appearance of a Bengal light, the troops transported in vehicles or the services disperse and the personnel get down on the ground.

Where enemy opposition was concerned, the reconnaissance had noted the presence of mine strips, which would support the mobile elements of the 7th Armoured Division. If all went well, the powerful mass of the Axis armoured vehicles *would not get delayed* by such elements and the structure of the divisions in tactical groups would allow for the immediate intervention of a portion of the forces and the eventual quick supplying of that intervention. Moreover, it was possible that the enemy, put on the alert, would be able to immediately bring forward the mobile divisions, in an attempt to impede the advance at a short distance from the line of reference A. In this case, the divisions had to be quick in deploying the artillery close to the friendly minefield.

The cruising speed, fixed at *eight* kilometres per hour, did not allow for delays. As a consequence, everything that could cut into it (from the unexpected and not immediately noted mechanical breakdown to the men getting off vehicles during a temporary halt, to not observing the distances meticulously) had to be drastically averted. These were the last recommendations[66].

Among the various measures, those of a logistic nature for the enveloping wing took on supreme importance. The overall autonomy was established in:

- 500 kilometres of fuel, of which 200 as a basic load, 100 in the divisional bases (El Kharita for the XX Corps, southwest of Abd el Rahman for the 15th *Panzer,* south of Tell el Aqqaqir for the 21st *Panzer*) and 200 in the bases behind the lines of El Daba;
- two days of food and water as a basic load and one in the forward bases;
- two *unfoc (daily ammunition load)* as a basic load, one in the forward bases and two at El Daba.

Obviously, the equipment to be carried with them had to be distributed in such a way as to avoid large simultaneous losses as an effect of enemy

[66] The prescriptions discussed are reported in the last directives issued by De Stefanis to the three divisions of the XX Corps, after Rommel's report. It should therefore be kept in mind that they formed the subject of attention by the Commander of the AIT (Historical diary of the XX Army Corps, ph. 3499/Op. dated 29/8/1942).

action. Another prominent subject was the recovery of war spoils materials. Keeping in mind the eventuality that the development of the operation could take place relying almost completely on captured materials and means, the order of priorities was the following: vehicles, field artillery and relative munitions, 6-pounder guns and relative munitions, fuel.

In the afternoon of that same 29th the AIT Headquarters communicated by telephone that day X had been established for the following day. The 30th Rommel issued a brief order of the day, ending with an incitement, "*The army, reinforced with new divisions, today goes on to the definitive destruction of the enemy. In these decisive days, I expect every soldier in the army to give the best of himself*".

The forces that prepared to enter the field were structured in two distinct blocks: the XXI and X Corps for the frontal action; the XX Corps, the DAK and the 90th Light for the enveloping manoeuvre. Three incomplete Italian reserve divisions from *Delease* were not participating in the enterprise, that is to say the *Pavia* Infantry Division (General Nazareno Scattaglia), the *Pistoia* Infantry Division (General Giuseppe Falugi) and the Armoured Division, *Giovani Fascisti* (General Ismaele Di Nisio). The first, reduced to two scarce battalions, was brought to Matruh to be reconstituted and in the meantime provide for the defence of the coast[67]; the second had just begun to flow into Cirenaica from the motherland, concentrating itself in the Agedabia-Gialo zone[68]; the third garrisoned the Siwa oasis[69].

More precisely, the XXI Corps was aligned from the sea to the El Mreir ridge included, with the 164th German Infantry Division to the north[70], the *Trento* to the centre and the *Bologna* to the south[71]. The German *Ewert* Group was in the rear in reserve. However, it was not a subdivision in homogeneous sectors in that the 164th Infantry Division and the

[67] The *Pavia* Infantry Division was made up of: Division Hq, 27th and 28th Infantry over two battalions, 26th Artillery over three groups, XVII Mixed Engineer Battalion.

[68] The *Pistoia* Infantry Division was made up of: Division Hq, 35th and 36th Infantry and 3rd Artillery. For the moment elements of the 36th Infantry and an artillery group had joined the 36th Infantry over three battalions.

[69] The *Giovani Fascisti* Armoured Division did not have anything armoured except the name and a vague intention of the Central Authority. It was constituted at the end of May 1942 with the battalion group GG.FF (which had already fought at Bir el-Gobi in December 1941), having become a regiment on 30 August. Among the few other existing divisions there were the III *Monferrato* Armoured Car Group and two M14 tanks, the only armoured elements. On 23 August a battalion was sent by plane to occupy the Siwa oasis and on 1 September it was joined by the rest of the division.

[70] The strength of the 164th Infantry Division was made up of: the Division Hq, the 125th Infantry, the 382nd Infantry and the 433rd Infantry over three battalions, the 220th Artillery over two groups, the 220th Recce Group, the 220th Pioneers Battalion, the 609th Anti-air Battalion, minor services and support units.

Units of the Italo-German Army on 30 August

Large Units	inf. b.	anti-tank b.	sapper b.	field art. grp.	anti-air grp.
X Army Corps	13	-	-	6	-
XX Army Corps	6	2	-	8	4
XXI Army Corps	12	1	1	9	-
	31	3	1	23	4
DAK	6	2	2	6	-
90th Light	6	1	1	1	-
164th Infantry	8	-	1	2	-
Army troops	4	1	-	7	8
	24	4	4	16	8

Notes:

a) The XX Corps had 244 medium tanks, 38 light, and 36 self-propelled and 32 armoured cars.

b) The DAK had 203 medium tanks and 41 armoured cars. Among the armoured troops there were 12 light tanks. The 90th Light had 6 armoured cars.

c) The expression *Inf. batt.* also includes *bersaglieri* and paratrooper battalions.

Trento faced the Australian salient at Tell el Eisa with mixed battalions, while the *Bologna,* reinforced with a paratrooper battalion from the *Ramcke* Brigade was concentrated in the Deir el Shein - El Mreir zone (Sketch N. 21). Here, a particularly solid system of emplacements was prepared on rocky terrain, taking advantage of the elements of the pre-existing enemy fortification.

The dispositions of the army corps were covered on the entire front by continuous mine strips of varying depth (from three-four metres in the Tell el Eisa sector to six-seven in that of El Mreir). A certain number of large "pockets" were supported by it, each delineated by less deep minefields that were separated from those nearby by a battalion stronghold. Other battalion strongholds were arranged on the lateral and posterior margins of the pockets. The defensive concept was based on the alternative presented to the enemy: wherever they headed against a stronghold, they would find fierce resistance; if he instead aimed against a curtain, he would have first met with the defence of the mine strips, then, once penetrated into the pocket, the flexible resistance of a company detached there for that purpose, finally the concentric firing of the surrounding strongholds and the artillery. Only a single stretch, east of Deir el Dhib, was without pockets and entrusted to a first order of three strongholds.

The *Bologna*'s sector was organised differently: a sector of five strongholds, variously linked to minefields and exploiting the semi-permanent field fortification set up by the British in their time.

The X Corps had the *Brescia* to the north, strongly entrenched in the Qaret el Abd and Bab el Qattara positions (Sketch N. 22).

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE ITALO-GERMAN ARMY FOR THE BATTLE OF ALAM EL HALFA

Commander: Field Marshal Erwin Rommel
Chief of Staff: General Alfred Gause

X Army Corps (General Federico Ferrari Orsi) over:
Brescia Infantry Division (General G. Battista Oxilia) ..... 4,300 men
Folgore Infantry Division (General Enrico Frattini) ..... 5,200 men
Ramcke Paratrooper Brigade (General Herman Ramcke) ..... 4,000 men
Corps Service and Support Troops ..... 2,300 men
Total ..... 15,800 men

XX Army Corps (General Giuseppe De Stefanis) over:
Ariete Armoured Division (General Adolfo Infante) ..... 7,200 men
Littorio Armoured Division (General Carlo Ceriana Mayneri) ..... 4,600 men
Trieste Motorized Division (General Franceso La Ferla) ..... 5,300 men
Corps Service and Support Troops ..... 1,500 men
Total ..... 18,600 men

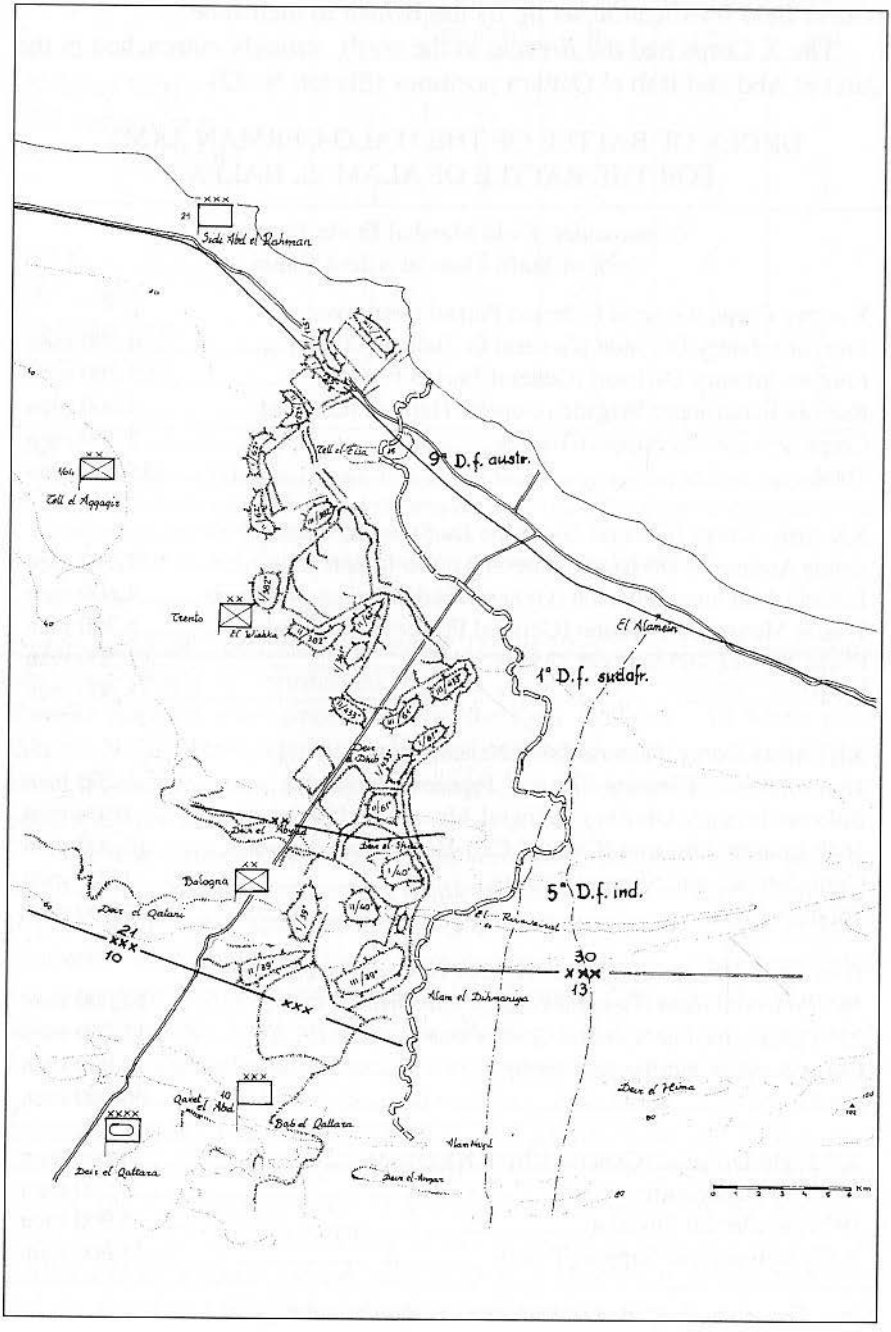
XXI Army Corps (General Enea Navarini) over:
Trento Infantry Division (General Franceso Scotti) ..... 5,200 men
Bologna Infantry Division (General Alessandro Gloria) ..... 4,800 men
164th Infantry Division (Colonel Carl-Hans Lungerhausen) ..... 10,600 men
Corps Service and Support Troops ..... 3,700 men
Total ..... 24,400 men

Deutsches Africorps (General Walther Nehring) over:
15th *Panzerdivision* (General George von Bismarck) ..... 12,000 men
21st *Panzerdivision* (General Gustav von Vaerst) ..... 11,700 men
Corps Service and Support Troops ..... 3,000 men
Total ..... 26,700 men

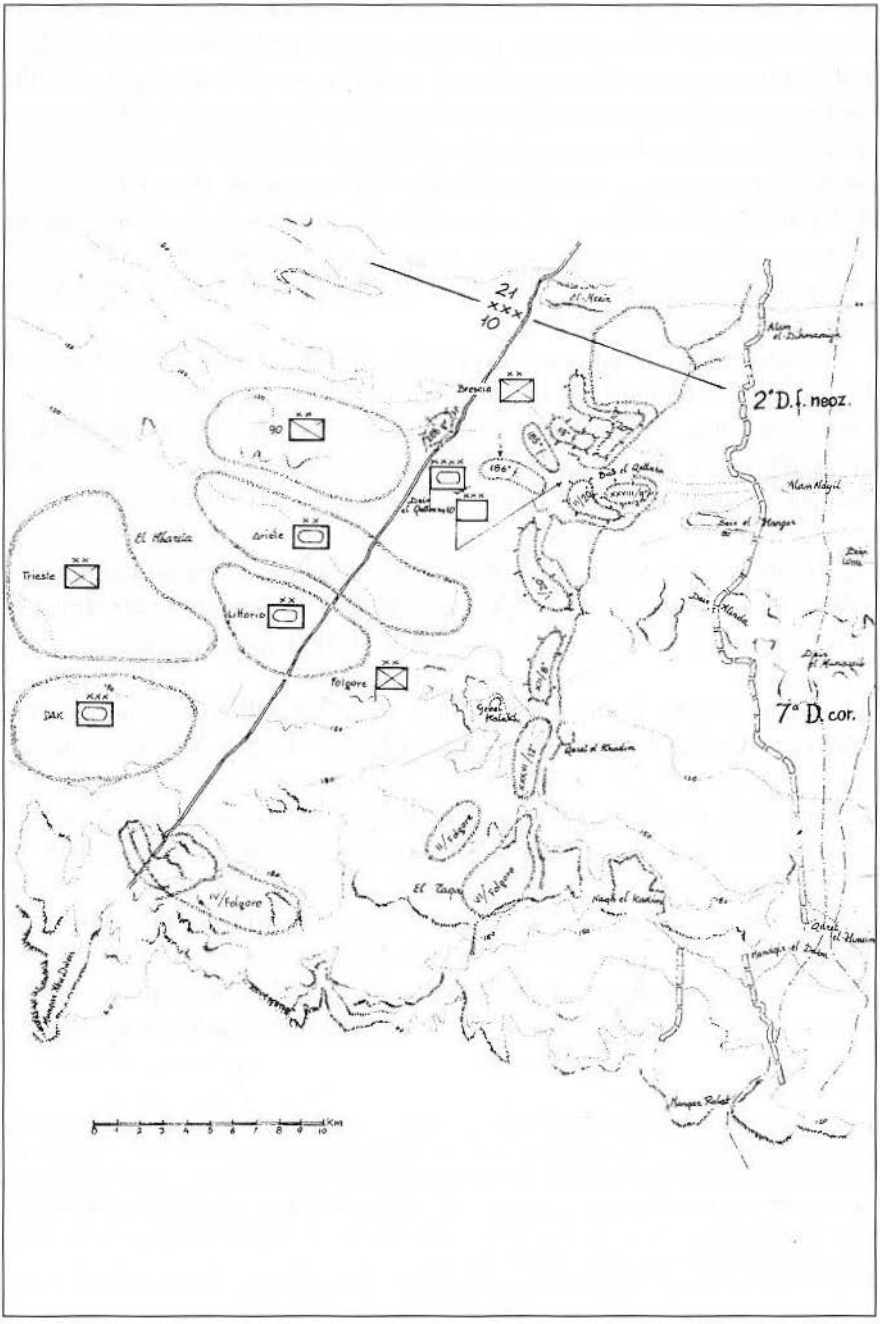
90th Light Division (General Ulrich Kleeman) ..... 8,500 men
Artillery Headquarters 104 ..... 3,500 men
19th Anti-aircraft Division ..... 5,900 men
Army Service and Support Troops ..... 25,000 men

Note: The strength of the German units is approximate.

Sketch N. 21
"FORMATION OF THE XXI CORPS AT THE END OF AUGUST"



Sketch N. 22
"FORMATION OF THE X CORPS AT THE END OF AUGUST"



The importance of this stretch of front for the purpose of the manoeuvre was such that the division was reinforced with the 186th Infantry (less one battalion) and the 187th Infantry of the *Folgore*, and with the XXVI-II/9th *Bersaglieri*. Naturally, the measure was not tied to the need for a natural defence as much as to the plan of attack, as we will see. To the south, the *Folgore* was organised on a broad front: two *bersaglieri* battalions east of Gebel Kalakh and two paratrooper battalions on the El Taqa plain, while the Naqb Abu Dweiss zone behind the lines was under the control of the IV Paratrooper Battalion[72]. In the *Folgore's* sector, the line was protected by a pre-existing but incomplete mined strip that was not sufficiently secure in part because it was laid by the British and not yet recognised (line of reference A).

Astride the El Alamein - Naqb Abu Dweiss Track, called the Red Track by the AIT and Qattara Track by the 8th Army, at the rear of the X Corps, the mass of the manoeuvre was assembled: the 90th Light, the XX Corps, the DAK and a mixed recce group made up of the 3rd, 33rd and 580th German Reconnaissance Groups and the recce group from the XX Corps[73].

Overall, there were little more than 84,000 Germans and 44,000 Italians under Rommel's direct control. There were another 48,600 Italians under the command of *Delease*, scattered a little bit everywhere.

Where the Air Force is concerned, the table below gives a comprehensive picture of the aircraft of the 5th Air Corps from 1 June to 1 August.

Since the month of July, Fougier had been deeply committed to incrementing the 5th Air Corps, among other things by transferring the 3rd Fighter Wing to Africa (the 23rd MC.202 Group and the 101st CR.42 Group), but above all by seeing to a measure of an exceptional nature both for the expected results and the industrial effort, that dealt with a mass-production of munitions and means of launching, experimented in samples, as early as 10 July. It had to do with giving the assault planes already

[72] On 1 August the paratrooper division had taken on the name 185th *Folgore* over: Division Hq, 185th Infantry (I, II, III, and IV Battalions), 186th Infantry (V, VI and VII Battalions), 187th Infantry (IX and X Battalions), 185th Artillery over two 47/32 groups, VIII Sapper Battalion, minor services and support units. Since the 185th Infantry Headquarters stayed in Italy with the I and II Battalion to form up the *Nembo* Division, the group of the II and IV Battalions (Lieut. Col. Bechi Luserna), sent to Egypt in the first echelon, initially remained autonomous.

[73] The recce group of the XX Corps was composed of the III Armoured Car Group *"Nizza"*, the VIII *Bersaglieri* Armoured Car Battalion and an 88 mm battery.

	Fighter load	eff.	Bomber load	eff.	Assault load	eff.
1 June						
East Sector	197	114	32	18	77	43
West Sector	57	30	–	–	19	13
1 July						
East Sector	154	119	28	13	67	48
West Sector	51	28	–	–	9	2
1 August						
East Sector	144	98	7	4	40	27
Centre Sector	51	38	18	11	25	18
West Sector	48	41	–	–	9	3

in Africa special anti-tank munitions. The bulk (about 130 planes) could not be ready at the same time, so in the beginning it was necessary to foresee the simultaneous engagement of all the available aircraft in tactical circumstances that were well-defined by the presence of large concentrations of adversary tanks and armoured cars. Subsequently, when the measure would become general, the employment would take place on the entire front with apportioning never inferior to the group.

On the organisational level, the North Africa Air Force was structured in three sectors beginning 15 July: West, from the Tunisian border to the 19th meridian; Centre, between the 19th and 25th meridian; East, from the 25th meridian eastwards. At the end of August the tactical headquarters of the East Sector for the 5th Corps, installed at Fuka, had under its command:

3rd Fighter Wing in two groups	(MC.200 and MC.202);
4th Fighter Wing in two groups	(MC.202);
50th Assault Wing in two groups	(CR.42);
8th Fighter Group	(MC.200);
101st Assault Group	(CR.42);
91st Bomber Squadron	(Cant. Z 1007 b).

The new *Fliegerführer Afrika*, General Hans Siedemann, had four Me.109 groups and three groups of *Stukas* at his disposal.

In conclusion, on 29 August the ratio between the AIT forces and those presumed for the 8th Army was considered to be the following:

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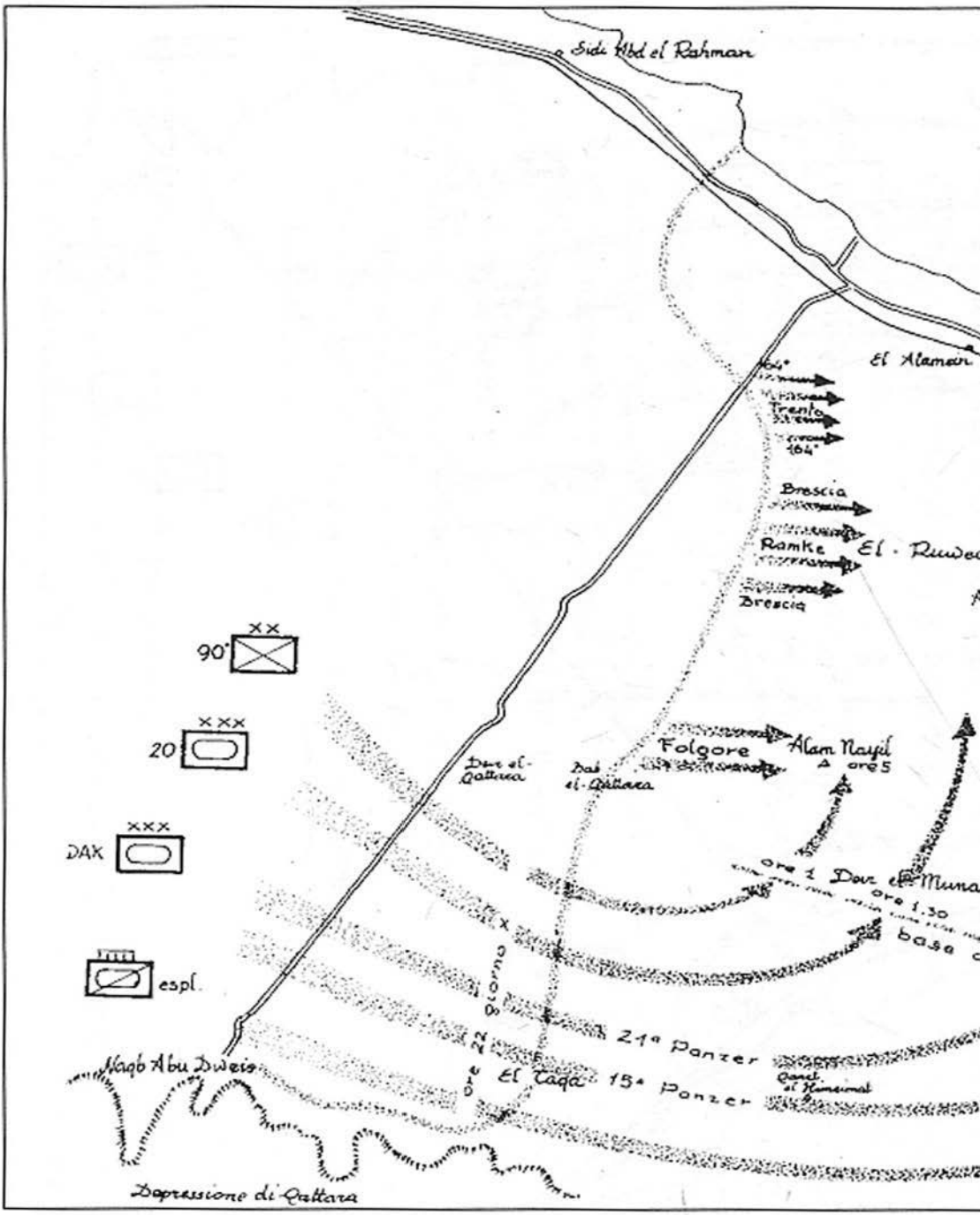
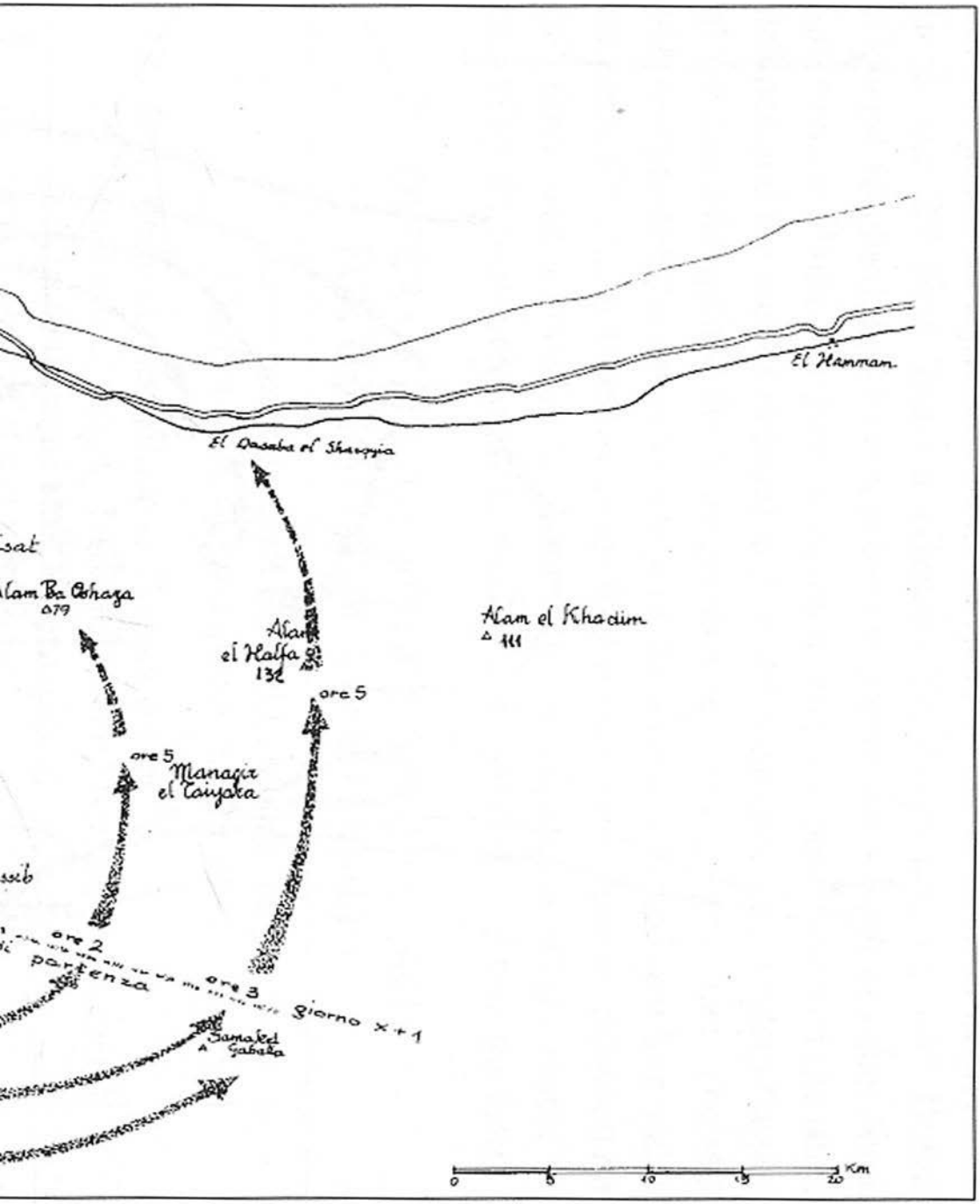
FOR THE BATTLE OF A



ketch N. 23
TIAL MANOEUVRE PLAN
ALAM EL HALFA (10 AUGUST)



Sapper and Infantry Battalions:	66 Axis vs. 66 British;
Field Artillery:	536 guns vs. 576;
Medium tanks:	447 (of which 244 Italian) vs. 450;
Armoured cars:	78 (of which 32 Italian) vs. 150;
Fighter planes:	365 (of which 215 Italian) vs. 600;
Assault and Bomber planes:	335 (of which 165 Italian) vs. 500.

They are overall figures whose significance is relative. For Rommel, it was about hurling the armoured mass at the similar adversary units by surprise, overwhelming them one after another. He had succeeded before and he hoped the British would make the same mistake again.

The manoeuvre plan that was initially sketched, and shown to Barbasetti by Rommel on 10 August (Sketch N. 23), foresaw an enveloping movement from south cutting *onto* the Alam el Haifa ridge. Of the three frontal attacks to be performed by the XXI and X Corps, the most northern had the pure and simple aim of clamping down; the central one had to be successful on Ruweisat moving against, so to say, the enveloping mass; the southern one, though of a minor extent, took on great importance because it had to cooperate with the conquest of the Alam Nayil ridge by the 90th Light: in other words, it represented the joint between the army's static wing and the marching wing. The supply nightmare at the rear of the armoured divisions should never be repeated again!

Then some adaptations took place and on the 22nd, when the AIT Headquarters issued the operation order, the action against Ruweisat entrusted to the *Bologna* had also taken on a demonstrative character, and the attack in the Alam Nayil sector was assigned to the *Brescia*, if necessary reinforced, to occupy the dominant Deir el Anqar and Deep Well positions and prevent the enemy from seizing any possibility of manoeuvring on the left flank of the enveloping movement. In addition, more importantly, the departure base and the objectives to attack were moved eastwards, in order to allow for the complete envelopment of the Alam el Halfa ridge (Sketch N. 24).

At the end of August the 8th Army was decidedly able to sustain Rommel's last offensive, considering the sturdiness and depth of its static structures, the firm possession of Alam el Halfa and the good qualitative and quantitative availability of the armoured units (Sketch N. 25). The 30th Corps (General Ramsden), aligned between the sea and Ruweisat included, comprised the 9th Australian (General Morshead), the 1st South African (General Pienaar) and the 5th Indian (General Briggs). Its task was defined

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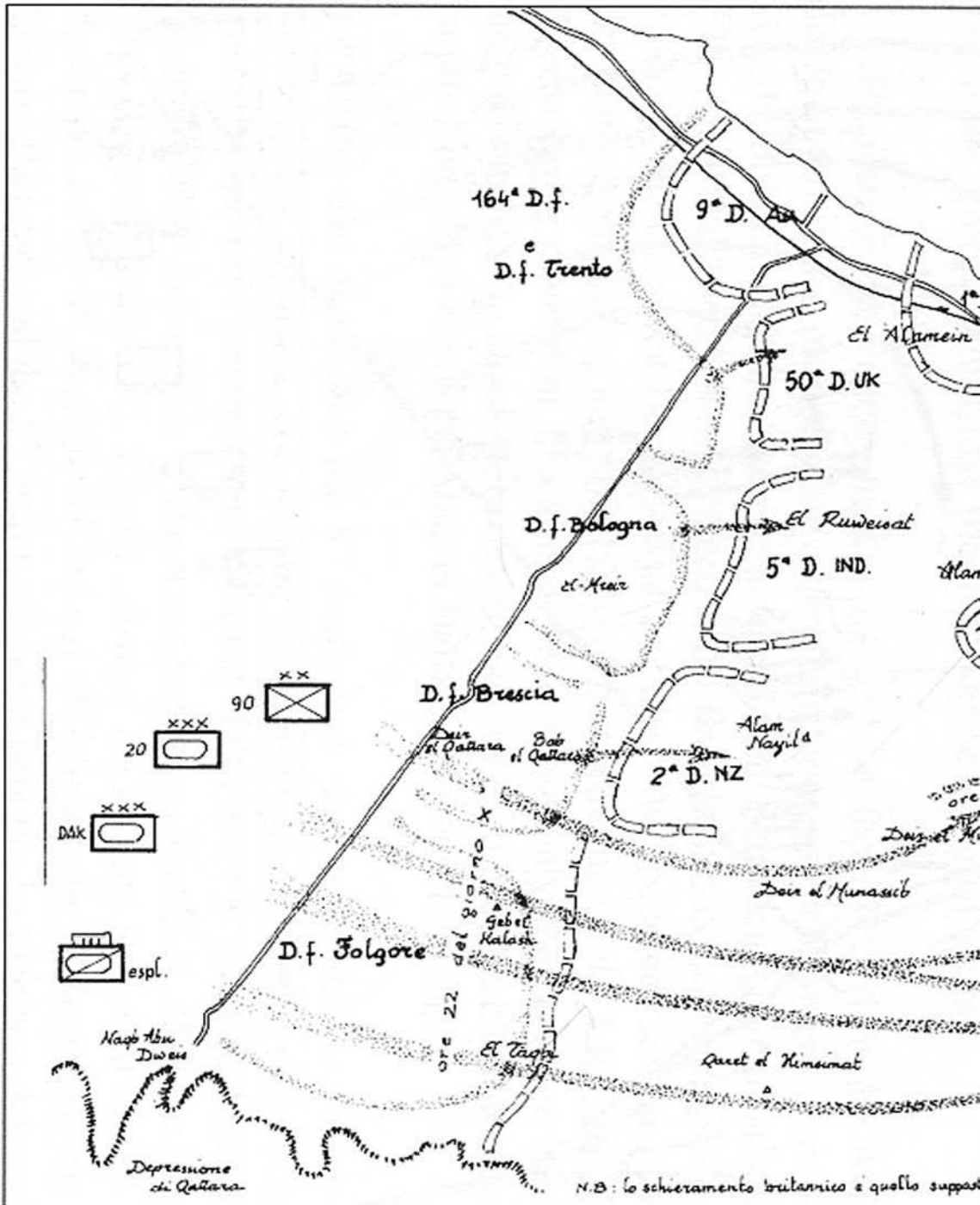
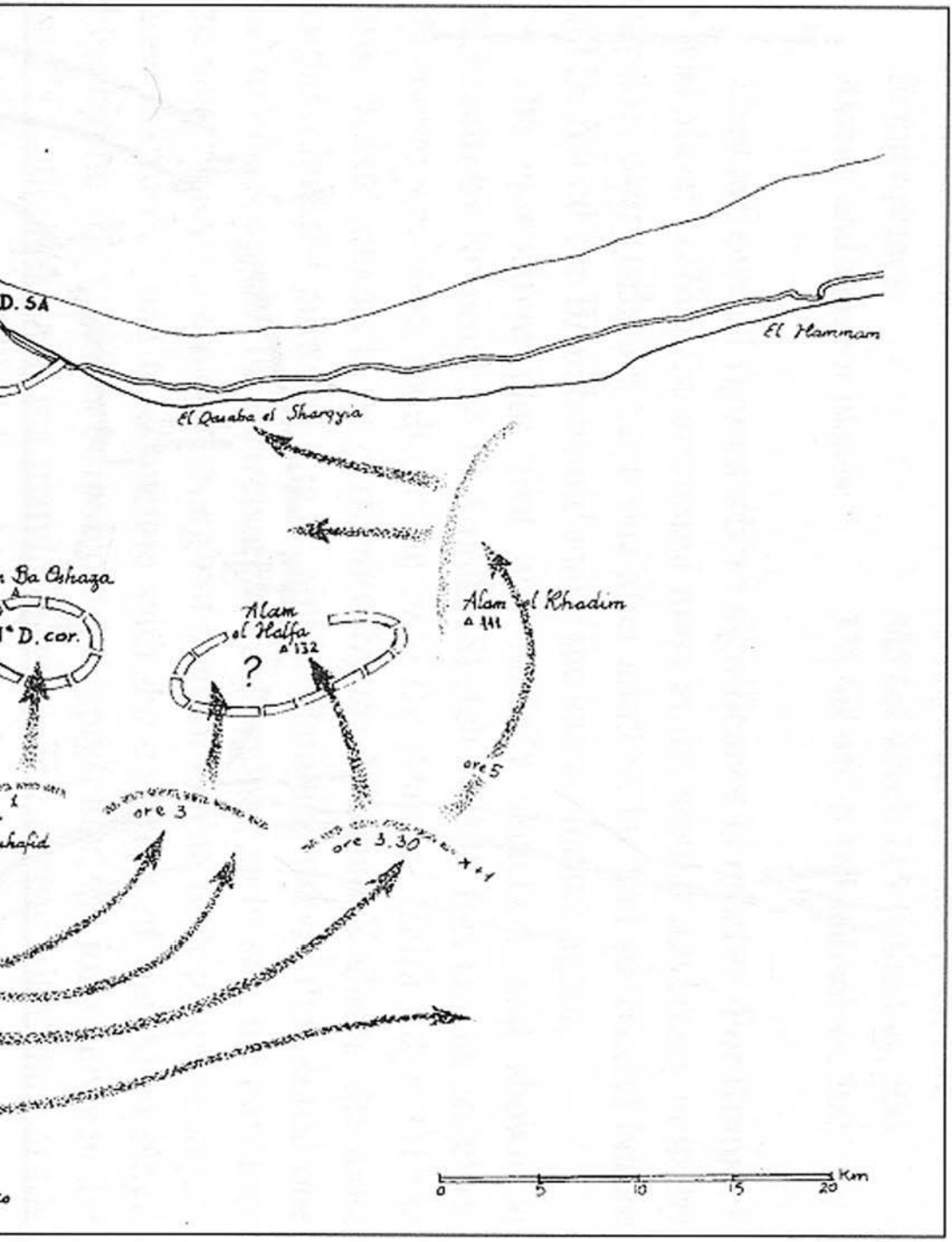
"ROMMEL'S DEFIN
FOR THE BATTLE OF A



ketch N. 24
NITIVE MANOEUVRE PLAN
ALAM EL HALFA (22 AUGUST)"



not to leave any doubts: resist to the bitter end on the positions, whenever and where attacked. The 13th Corps (General Horrocks) had, on the other hand, a much more complex task, such that the good result of the entire defence plan was dependant on its correct execution. Its two infantry divisions, the 2nd New Zealand (General Freyberg) and the 44th British (General Hughes), had to guarantee the secure possession of Alam Nayil and Alam el Halfa. The first constituted the pivot point between the static defence and the mobile defence and, in the meantime, the western bastion of the halt line against the Italo-German enveloping movement. The second represented the eastern bastion of the aforementioned halt line and at the same time the manoeuvre hinge for the dynamic response. Between the two there was a corridor of about a dozen kilometres which would be closed by the armoured units or would be the ground of action for them.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE 8TH BRITISH ARMY
FOR THE BATTLE OF ALAM EL HALFA

Commander: General Bernard L. Montgomery
Chief of Staff: General Francis de Guingand

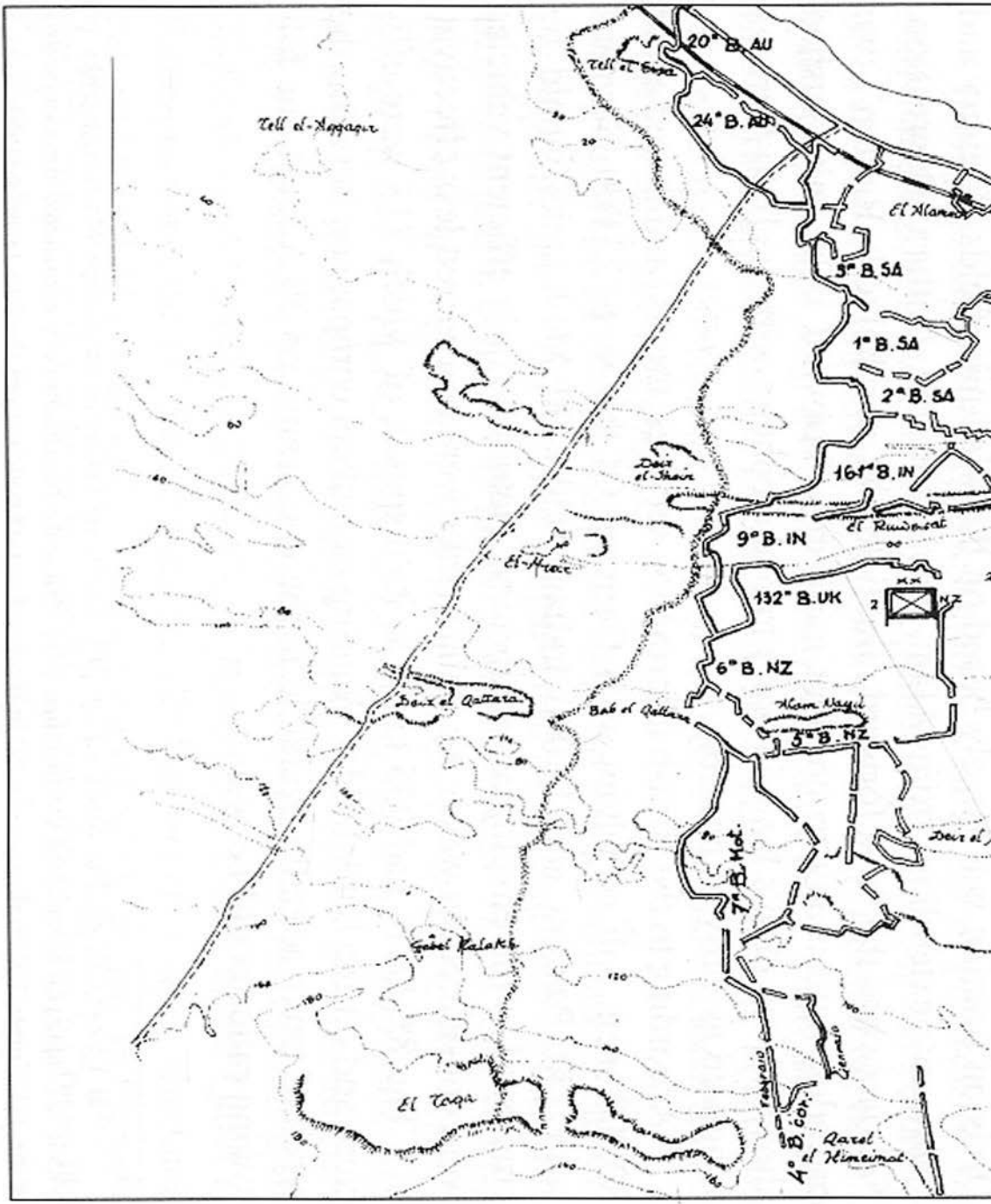
13th Army Corps (General Brian G. Horrocks) over:
- 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division (General Bernard C. Freyberg):
  - 5th Brigade (General H.K. Kippenberger);
  - 6th Brigade (General G.H. Clifton);
  - 132nd Brigade (General C.B. Robertson);
  - divisional units.
- 44th British Infantry Division (General J.T.P. Hughes):
  - 131st Brigade (General E.H.C. Frith);
  - 133rd Brigade (General A.W. Lee);
  - divisional units.
- 7th Armoured Division (General J.M.L. Renton):
  - 4th Armoured Brigade (General W.G. Carr);
  - 7th Motorized Brigade (General T.J.B. Bosvile);
  - divisional units.
- 10th Armoured Corps (General Alec H. Gatehouse):
  - 8th Armoured Brigade (General N. Custance);
  - 22nd Armoured Brigade (General G.P.B. Roberts);
  - divisional units.

Corps service and support troops

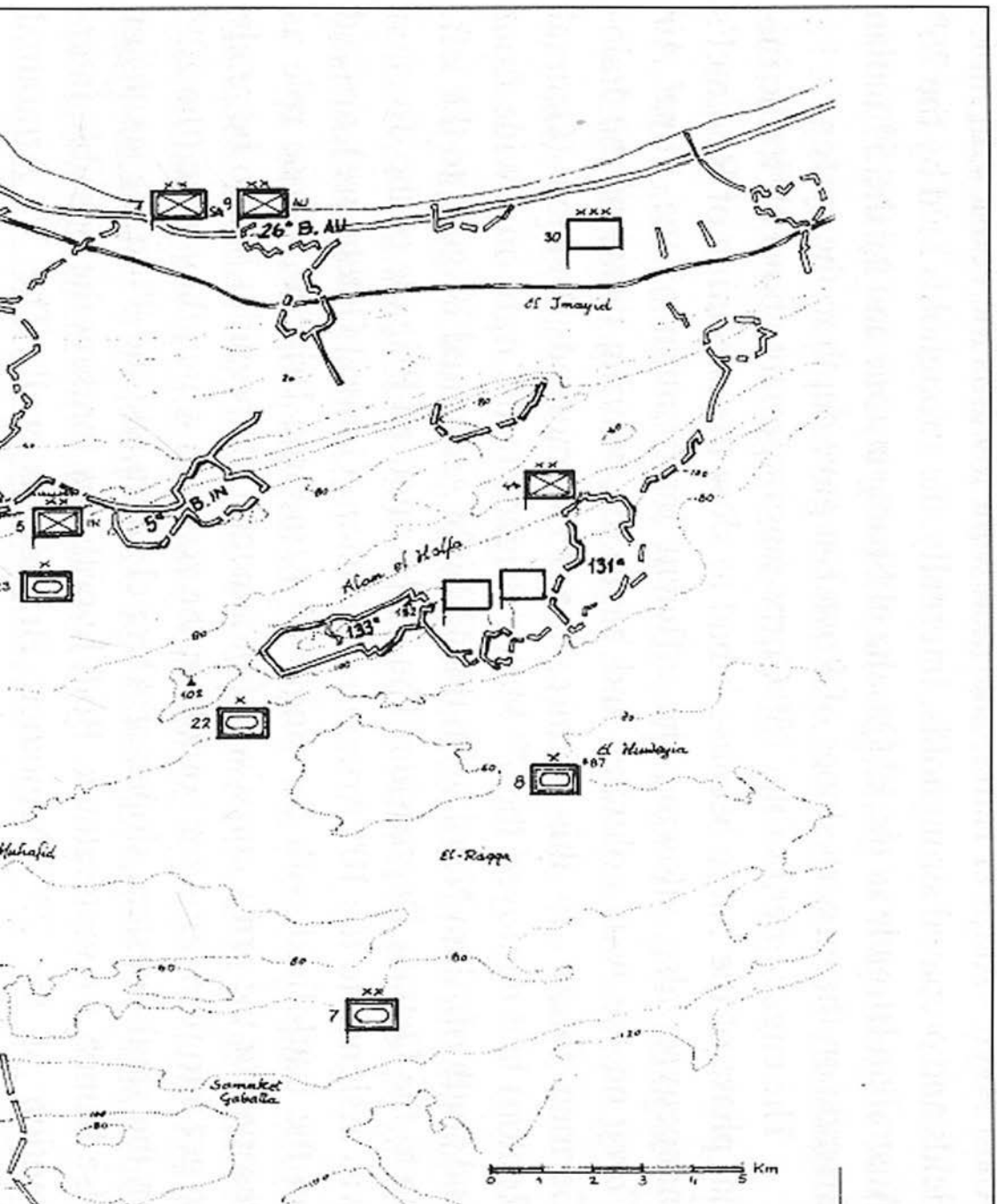
30th Army Corps (General W.H.C. Ramsden) over:
- 1st South African Infantry Division (General Dan H. Pienaar);
  - 1st Brigade (General C.L. de W. du Toit); •/•

Sketch

"THE FORMATION OF THE 8TH A



N. 25
RMY AT THE END OF AUGUST"



2nd Brigade (General W.H.E. Poole);
3rd Brigade (General R.J. Palmer);
divisional units.

5th Indian Infantry Division (General H.R. Brigg):
5th Brigade (General D.H. Russell);
9th Brigade;
161st Brigade (General F.E.C. Hughes);
divisional units.

9th Australian Infantry Division (General Leslie J. Morshead):
20th Brigade (General W.J.V. Windeyer);
24th Brigade (General A.L. Godfrey);
161st Brigade (General R.W. Tovell);
divisional units.

23rd Armoured Brigade (General G.W. Richards).
Corps service and support troops.
Army service and support troops.

ORGANIZATION CHART OF THE BRITISH ARMOURED DIVISION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
As of day 24 August 1942

Division Headquarters (with 8 tanks and two tank-destroyers)
an armoured car regiment (with 64 armoured cars)

Armoured Brigade Headquarters (with 10 tanks) over:
three tank regiments (over 85 tanks, 8 tank-destroyers, and 6 close support tanks)
one motorized infantry battalion

Motorized Infantry Brigade Headquarters with:
three infantry motorized battalions

Divisional Artillery Headquarters with:
three field Artillery regiments (with 25-pounder guns)
one anti-tank regiment (with 6-pounder guns)
an anti-aircraft artillery regiment (with 40 mm guns)

Divisional Engineers Headquarters with:
two engineer squadrons
one technical engineer unit

Divisional service and support troops.

In short, Montgomery had effected an immense entrenched field. The perimeter rested on the following key positions: Tell el Eisa - Ruweisat - Alam Nayil - Alam el Halfa, and then went towards the coast with minefields and prepared strongholds. Internally, the strongholds held by the 26th Australian Brigade in the El Qasaba el Sharqyia zone and by the 5th Indian Brigade on the eastern slopes of Ruweisat gave depth to the system.

The engagement of the 13th Corps was important above all in the initial phase of the battle because it had to slow the execution of Rommel's manoeuvre, also allowing the efficient intervention of the *Royal Air Force* on the Axis columns, and begin the wearing down of the Italo-German forces. In this picture, the 7th Armoured Division (General Renton) had deployed the 7th Motor Brigade to the right on a wide front and south of Alam Nayil, with the 4th Light Armoured Brigade to the left, up to the Qattara Depression. The 22nd Armoured Brigade of the division was assigned to the 10th Armoured Division (General Gatehouse), arrived on the battlefield with the single 8th Armoured Brigade, whose role as reserve for the army corps was fundamental. Its brigades had to be ready to get into formation for combat in the zones in which they were (the 22nd on the south-western slopes of Alam el Halfa and the 8th to the south) or else launch a counterattack. Both hypotheses foresaw the possible intervention of the 23rd Armoured Brigade as well. The 7th Armoured Division's action was largely based on the wide minefields, *January* and *February,* extending from Alam Nayil and the Qattara Depression. *February* was the most forward minefield and, parallel to it, Renton's two brigades were ready to conduct ambushes. Forward light units pushed ahead into no man's land, in order to make contact with the Italo-German vanguard as early as possible.

According to the British information services, the AIT numbered about 82,000 men, half of whom were German. Of this sum, 25,000 Germans with 230 *Panzers* and 17,000 Italians with 200 M14 tanks would be employed in the enveloping manoeuvre. Naturally, only efficient vehicles were considered, however the Italian tanks were considered less effective.

The 8th Army had 935 tanks at its disposal, of which 713 were efficient and on the battlefield[74]. Wanting to make a comparison between the types of tanks actually available in the two armies on 30 August, the following ratios could be seen:

[74] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Tanks, cit.*, p. 215. According to Carver, there were 945 British tanks, of which 772 equipped to units on the frontline (693 efficient). Alexander only considered the availability of the 13th Corps: 300 medium tanks, 80 light plus about a hundred from the 23rd Armoured Bde.

164 *Grants* vs. 110 Pzkw III Sp., IV and IV Sp.;
370 *Valentines* and *Crusaders* vs. 93 Pzkw III;
179 *Stuarts* vs. 12 Pzkw II and 244 M14 tanks.

The British had been waiting for the beginning of the offensive since 24 August. A message that arrived that day, at 13:17, at the signals centre of the 30th Corps and intercepted by the AIT, gave orders for

> "All units of the 30th Corps to be ready to enter into action beginning at 23:59 this evening (...) State of alert every morning from 5:45 to 6:15 and every evening from 19:45 to 20:15 (...) No permits or leave".

Day after day, therefore, the tension increased. On the 30th the *Royal Air Force* reported large concentrations of Italo-German troops in the southern sector of the front.

To overcome the space running between the Bab el Qattara - Gebel Kalakh - El Taqa alignment and the departure bases, the time schedule ordered by Rommel conceded three hours to the 90th Light to cover about thirty kilometres, five hours to the XX Corps for about fifty kilometres, five and a half to the DAK for about sixty.

It is quite clear that this assessment of the speed of progression on rough and unknown terrain is rather optimistic, considering the certainty of having to cross minefields of unknown placements, extensions, depths and densities, and with the equal certainty of a dynamic delay action by the 7th Armoured Division. The fact is very strange, especially in relation to the delays and unforeseen events of the Ain el Gazala manoeuvre that could not have been forgotten.

At 19:30 on the 30th the vanguard of the armoured columns set out. On the opposite side, the 7th Motor Brigade had the II Battalion of the Rifle Brigade in line in contact with the New Zealanders, the II Bn/ *King's Royal Rifle Corps* at Deir Alinda (that is in the direction of the 90th Light's advance), the 10th *Hussars* with 42 *Crusaders* just a bit further south and then the IX of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps*. The VII of the Rifle Brigade was kept in reserve. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade had mixed units at its disposal: the I Battalion of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps* in the Qaret el Himeimat zone, the 11th *Hussars* and the 12th *Lancers* each on 54 armoured cars and the 4th/8th *Hussars* with 50 *Stuarts* south of Himeimat. In the rear, the 3rd *County of London Yeomanry* with 27 *Crusaders*. The XX Corps, the DAK and the reconnaissance group had to pass through this sector.

The 31st of August

The advance of the Italo-German divisions was carried out in a very different climate than what had been imagined. Not only was it much slower than planned, but the first resistance took place parallel to a minefield the dimension of which had not even been suspected. The rough terrain made it easy for the British patrols, that, aware of the incursion, withdrew towards their minefields but without excessive hurry. The first obstacle was obviously *February*. It was deep and well-prepared and even better defended by machineguns and artillery, reason for which the Axis troops were stopped for a while.

The 90th Light started a resolute job of detecting and removing the mines south of Deir Alinda, but was nailed down for some time by the fire of the 7th Motor Brigade and the 3rd and 4th Mounted Artillery. Not even the cover provided for the infantry by some of the *Panzers* allowed for a prompt crossing.

The XX Corps advanced in two divisional columns (the *Ariete* on the left and the *Littorio* on the right), with the *Trieste* in second formation divided into two parts. The combat service support (A echelon) followed. The armoured divisions were structured in three tactical groups, each over a medium tank battalion, a self-propelled artillery unit, a truck-towed artillery unit and one of *bersaglieri* transported in vehicles; the motorized division was subdivided into two combat groups each based on a regiment[75].

The snag with *February* was fatal. Just after midnight, at less than ten kilometres past the line of reference A, the vanguards were stopped by a mined strip preceded by scattered mines, on which various tanks and vehicles were blown up. Having begun the opening of the corridors under intense harassment fire, the *Littorio* was the first to overcome the minefield at 4:30, and three quarters of an hour later, when the bulk of the columns were passing into the corridors, it found itself in front of *January*. The situation had become quite difficult. The *Ariete* had suffered very seri-

[75] The XX Corps had left the XXXVII/9th *Bersaglieri* and the XII/8th *Bersaglieri* dependent on the X Corps, drawn up respectively northeast and southeast of Gabel Kalakh, six batteries of various calibre and two replacement companies from the *Trieste* about to arrive, for lack of vehicles. This was beyond the XXVIII/9th *Bersaglieri* and the III/8th *Bersaglieri* already detached to Bab el Qattara. On this occasion, it is worth reporting a notation made by Gen. Ceriana Mayneri in his personal diary on 30 August: *" My Chief of Staff, Col. Scala, is suddenly assigned (this is too much! It is inconceivable that such transfer could be made in this moment by our High Command!) to the North Africa Logistic Headquarters"* (C. CERIANA MAYNERI, *op. cit.*, p. 120).

ous losses in engineers because it had unfortunately come up against another mine-strip; so at that point General Infante decided to halt just west of *January* and wait to utilise the corridors opened by the *Littorio*. This immediately got down to work, although the operation became arduous due to the shelling of the British batteries.

The DAK also found itself in trouble. Its vanguards made contact with *February* further south; first they attacked its defences, but instead of a light resistance by patrols or isolated units, they found an unexpectedly strong response. At that point the *Desert Air Force* turned up. The magnesium flares illuminated the area as if it were daylight where the Axis armoured and motor columns arduously made their way and the shower of bombs spread confusion and losses. At about 3:00 Nehring communicated to Rommel the impossibility of reaching the assigned objectives either immediately or soon. And seeing how in war misfortunes never come alone, shortly after Gen. Bismarck was killed by a mine and Nehring serious wounded by a British bomber.

The dawn of 31 August therefore saw the entire mass of the manoeuvre stymied between the two main minefields with errors in movement direction (the 15th *Panzer* had slanted southwards hindering the progression of the recce group) and, to make matters worse, with two out of three DAK commanders out of combat. The result was a situation where the natural difficulties were so well-cultivated by the *Desert Air Force* that an alarming level of confusion was produced.

Rommel was terribly disappointed. He had not foreseen having to turn to a complete operation of crossing protected minefields. At 2:45 he had pressed the columns, "*Up to now you have advanced too slowly. Only a speedy advance and break can guarantee success*". At 6:00 he ordered the XX Corps to draw up all of the artillery and to plunge forward, considering that the 90th Light and the DAK, on the sides, were attacking *January*. The illusion was brief and at 7:10 he was forced to order his units to halt west of *January*.

> "My plan to advance 50 kilometres eastwards with the motor units still in that night of moonlight", Rommel admitted melancholily, "and to resume the attack again from there at dawn northwards was not successful. The attacking units had been held for too long by strong barrages until then unknown"[76].

[76] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

At that point Rommel seriously wondered if he should give up the offensive, seeing that the surprise had vanished and that at that time it was necessary to face the British response. He determined to make a decision after having examined the situation with the DAK. Here he found Colonel Bayerlein, the Chief of Staff, who had taken temporary leadership of the *Afrikakorps* and continued the forcing of *January*. Bayerlein explained that the crossing of the minefields had been achieved and that it was worth persevering in the effort. Actually, *Afrikakorps* had managed to push even beyond the second mined obstacle. As compensation, the 21st *Panzer*, on which the majority of the night air bombings had fallen, had met with a passage through *January*, so the solution to its problem was rapid. The 15th *Panzer*, on the other hand, had to work quite hard, also to dislodge the enemy from Qaret el Hineimat. Nevertheless, if the vanguards were able to establish a secure bridgehead, also thanks to the withdrawal of the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, the passages still represented a bottleneck and, as a consequence, a cause for significant slowing in the advance. To this was added the already heavy consumption of fuel.

Rommel agreed with Bayerlein's proposals, probably without excessive conviction. In fact, he had to resign himself to modifying the initial plan. No more envelopment of Alam el Halfa. To gain a bit of time, it was necessary to head north as soon as the *January* had been completely overcome and the units had been reorganised and resupplied.

> "We considered", Bayerlein remembers, "whether it was opportune to interrupt the battle, considering that the British knew perfectly where we were and what our intentions were. Rommel discussed the situation with me and we came to the decision to continue the offensive. Yet a variation was imposed; the long range action and the consequent surrounding of the 8th Army was no longer possible, since the enemy had had more than sufficient time to prepare a counteroffensive action. The surprise attack had failed! Among other things, it was impossible for us to pass by the fortified heights of Alam Halfa in full daylight. Thus the enemy imposed another solution on us, which meant we had to complete the conversion to the north before the planned time and that we therefore had to push up the heights at the back of Alam Halfa and, in particular, up the important "Hill 132" which had to be conquered with a direct action"[77].

[77] P. CARELL, *op. cit.*, pp. 427-428.

The DAK's new objective was now Alam el Halfa. The XX Corps would occupy Hill 102, in the extreme southwest of the ridge, and the 90th Light preserve the Deir el Hima objective. In the meantime, the II/185th Paratroopers *Folgore* was sent to occupy Qaret el Himeimat to guarantee its possession (Sketch N. 26).

Later on, discussions emerged about this variation, essentially based on the statement by some British sources that determining influence was provoked by the famous topographical map, made up and left in no man's land as a deception, as mentioned before.

The map, which aimed at dissuading Rommel *"from a wide sweeping movement around the Alam el Halfa ridge to cut our communications with Alexandria by pushing north-eastwards"*, showed *"a rough area that blocked the road that we did not want the enemy to take and an excellent area ahead that ran up to the Alam el Halfa ridge and beyond, along the ridge, reaching all the way up to the railway"*[78]. More precisely, the area south of Hill 132 of Alamel Halfa, characterised by very soft sand and therefore hardly passable, was indicated as smooth transit.

On the other hand, a stretch south of Hill 111 of Alam el Khadim was falsely shown as very uneven under a layer of soft sand. In short, a dissuasion from the direction for El Hamman passing through Alam el Khadim, which interested the right of the DAK, and an invitation to the Deir el Agram - Alam el Halfa direction, which interested the left of the DAK. Even so, the invitation was not necessary because the terrain south of Alam el Halfa was already defined on the map utilised by the DAK as *Steiniger Boden* (*Stony ground*) and *Easy stony ground*.

Von Mellenthin was explicit, *"I can confirm that that map was considered genuine and served the aim of throwing the Afrikakorps off the track"*, clearly referring to the soft sandy area encountered by the DAK in its first attack on Alam el Halfa, which was source of further loss of time and greater consumption of fuel[79]. However, the concrete role of the trick map appears to have really been insignificant.

Rommel met with De Stefanis at 8:30, he had him give a report on the situation (the *Littorio* had been crossing *January* for about an hour) and he ordered to have the *Ariete* and the *Trieste* also pass through the corridor

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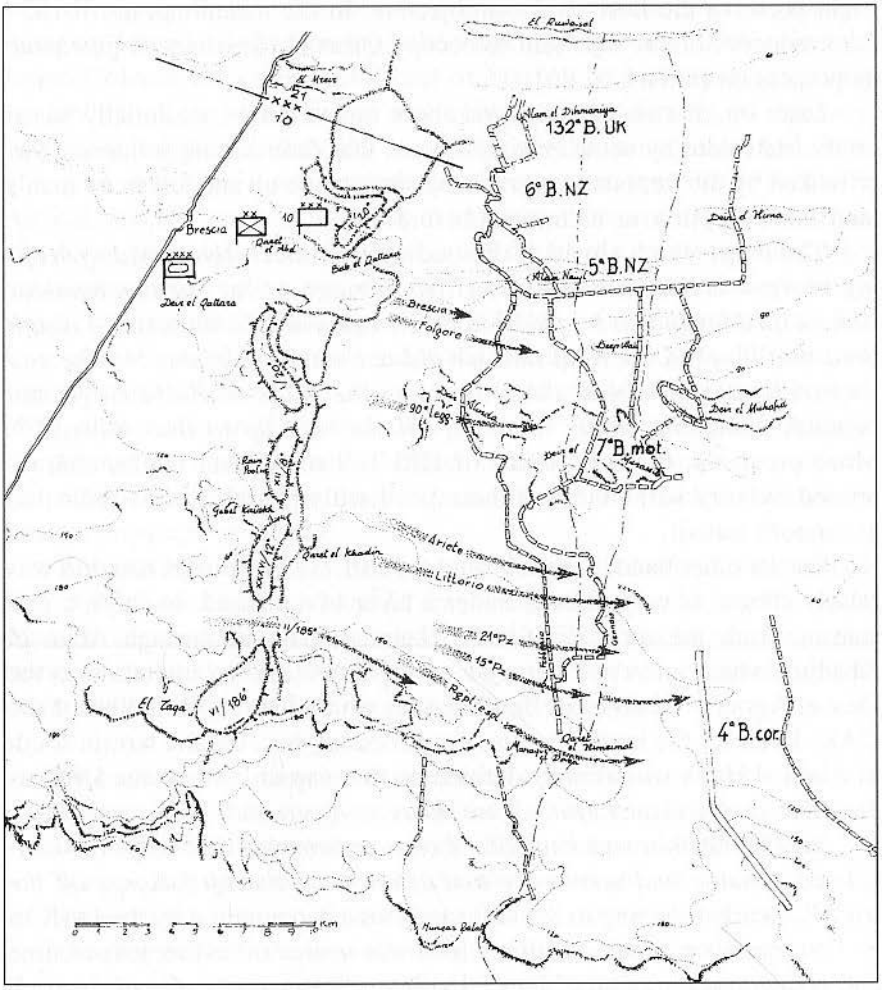
[78] H. ALEXANDER, *D'El Alamein à Tunis et à la Sicile*, Paris, Lauvauzelle, 1949, p. 24. The original map of road conditions and the false one are reported by Francis de Guingand in *Operation Victory*, Hodder and Stoughton, pp. 144 and 147.

[79] F. VON MELLENTHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

Sketch N. 26
"THE SITUATION AT 8:00 ON 31 AUGUST"



created by the *Littorio*. At 12:00 the XX Corps had to resume the run north-eastwards simultaneously with the DAK.

Everything did not work as desired on the British side either. More or less, the extent of the Italo-German effort was correctly evaluated and, at dawn, the 13th Corps Headquarters felt confident that the 7th Armoured Corps was able to fight back the push parallel to the minefields. Except that the German penetration in the Himeimat sector, and in particular the infiltration of the recce group, made the 4th Light Armoured Brigade retreat and, as a consequence, the 7th Motor Brigade got the impression that they risked

finding themselves with the units trapped and surrounded between the minefields. Reason for which General Bosvile decided to gather the brigade east of Deir el Ragil, where the VII Battalion of the Rifle Brigade was.

General Horrocks came to know about it in the late morning and immediately hurried Renton, as the orders given to the 7th Armoured Division were to block the enemy on *February* if possible, otherwise on *January* and, in the worst hypothesis, to carry out a wearing down and delaying action. To make the remark more tangible, Horrocks ordered Renton to send the 7th Motorized Brigade forward again. It was the 10th *Hussars* to turn back towards the Axis columns. Around midday, it took position on the northern border of Deir el Muhafid, putting itself in contact with the 2nd New Zealand Cavalry, which was in the Deep Well zone.

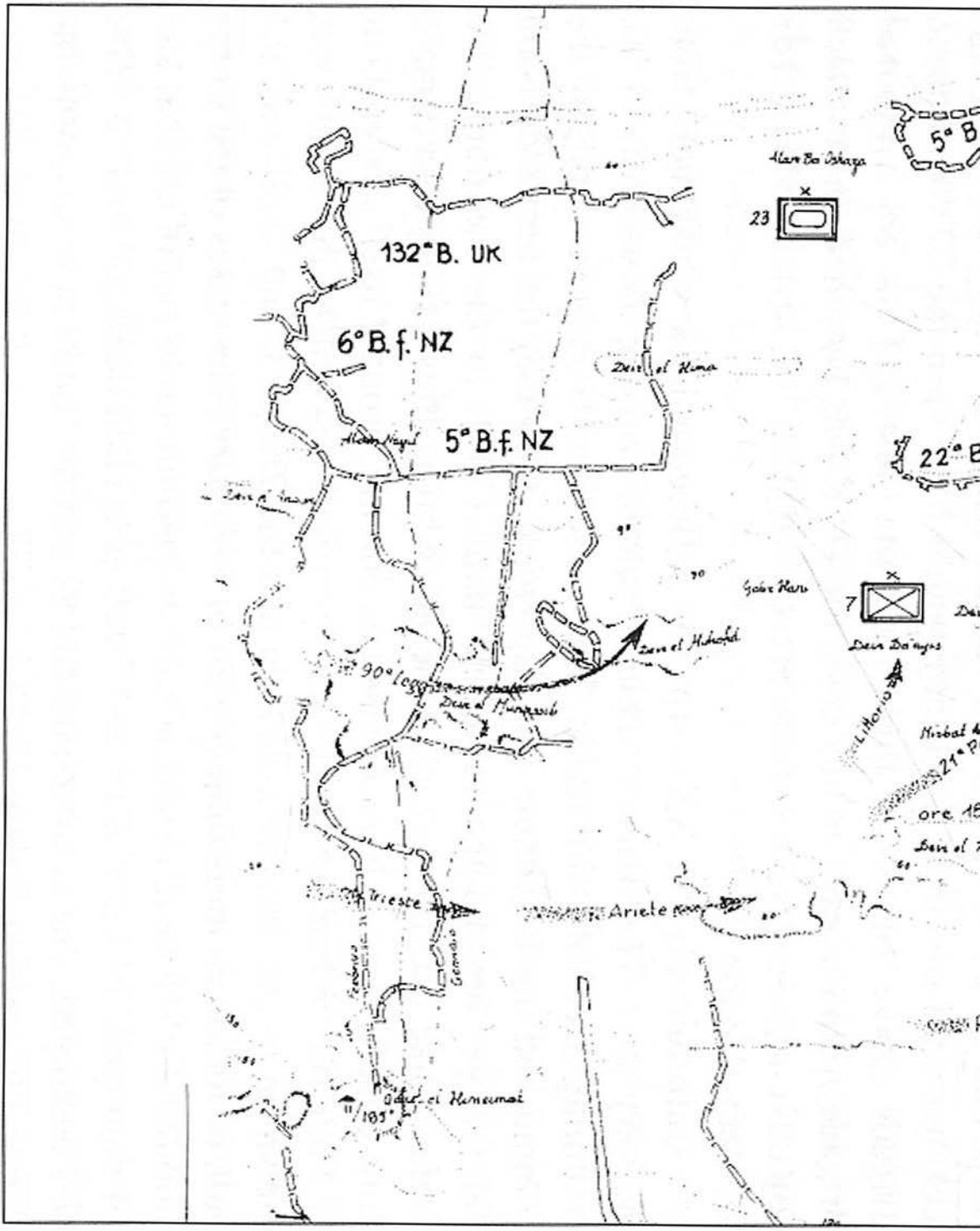
The DAK, whose command had been taken over by General von Vaerst, finished resupplying at about 13:00 and shortly after started to move again in a northeast direction. The sand storm that began at 11:00 was raging but, if on the one hand it caused difficulties for men and vehicles, on the other it made things easier by hindering aviation from railing against them. Furthermore, the *3rd County of London Yeomanry* with 27 *Crusaders* was added to the units of the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, which had already faced the advance and continued with the mobile defence. In short, at 15:00 the DAK had just gotten past the departure base that, according to the original plan, should have been reached at 3:30.

There still remained some hours of light, so the Germans proceeded (Sketch N. 27). The 21st *Panzer* was moving on the left, then commanded by Colonel Lungerhausen, who in turn had handed over the 164th Infantry Division to Colonel Hecker, the army engineer commander. The 15th *Panzer* was on the right under the orders of General von Randow, who, back after being wounded, had remained on call up until then. The reconnaissance group moved southeast, having reached Samaket Gaballa in the late morning.

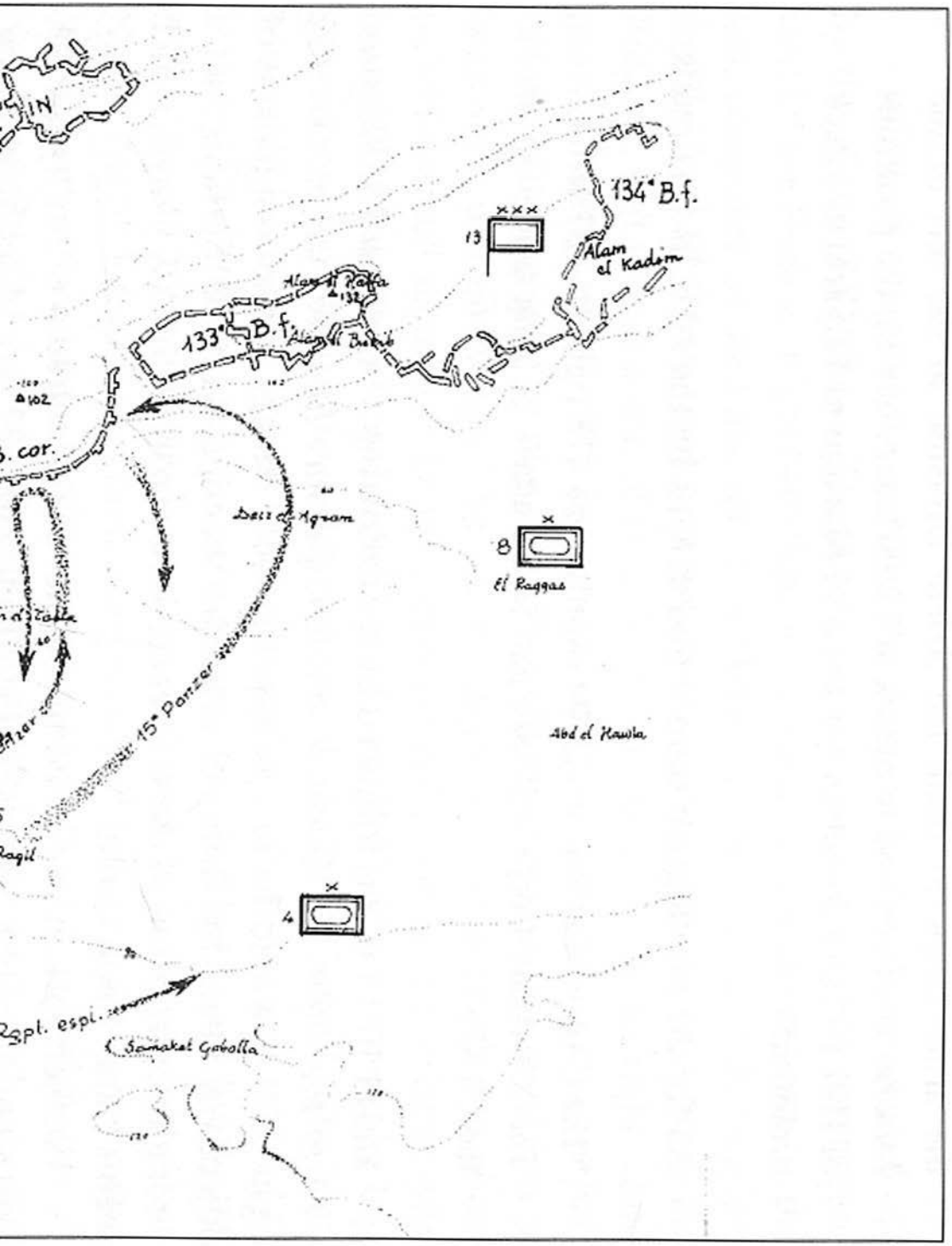
It seems that neither the 22nd Armoured Brigade, organised in a semicircle around Hill 102 (the objective of the XX Corps), nor, at the very least, the 8th Armoured Corps had been spotted. Roberts's 22nd Armoured Brigade had four tank regiments available, each over two squadrons of *Grants* or *Crusaders* and one of *Stuarts*, for a total of 92 *Grants*, 34 *Crusaders*, and 40 *Stuarts*. Moreover, it counted on 18 25-pounder guns of the 1st Mounted Artillery and 12 6-pounder guns. The 8th Armoured Brigade was over three regiments and put 72 *Grants* and 12 *Crusaders* in line.

Sketch N

"THE SITUATION AT 20



N. 27
:00 ON 31 AUGUST"



In the afternoon, Richards pushed the squadron of *Stuarts* southwards, in order to gather information about the enemy without getting fully engaged with them. At about 16:30, the 21st *Panzer* was spotted and an hour later the forward elements of the 22nd Armoured Battalion established fire contact with the Germans, then pulled back. At 18:00 Lungerhausen opened the formations to move an attack against Hill 102.

The clash was violent and initially appeared to turn in favour of the Germans due to the superior range of their weapons, but, after the distance was closed, the counterattack of the *Scots Greys* and the fire of the British artillery ended up striking the attack down. The 21st *Panzer* disengaged and pulled back to Deir el Ragil taking advantage of the evening shadows.

The 15th *Panzer* had started a movement to undermine the left of the 22nd Armoured Brigade and also engage them in combat despite exposing themselves to the line fire of the 133rd British Infantry Brigade entrenched at Alam el Halfa, except that, given the sunset, it could not put the attempt into act and retreated in turn. The 22nd Armoured Brigade left 19 tanks on the battlefield, the Germans more or less the same.

The recce group, an object of particular interest to the *Desert Air Force* and with seriously damaged vehicles and armoured vehicles, had stopped for the whole day to the southeast, beyond Samaket Gaballa.

Certainly, also the DAK's manoeuvre had been very slow. The approximately 25 kilometres that ran through the area southeast of Deir el Ragil to Hill 102 were covered in three and a half hours: too long, considering the absence of enemy opposition and air offensives, and just a bit justified by the *Khamsin* and the crossing of the Deir el Ragil. Rommel wrote, "*at about 16:00 our attack on Hill 132 [Alam el Halfa] suspended*", but this version does not agree with British sources. On the other hand, it was 19:15 when the XX Corps received orders to arrange an all around defence and to get in contact with the 90th Light to the left and the DAK to the right. According to Rommel, the reason for failure could be found in the large fuel consumption provoked by the difficult condition of the terrain and by the slow speed of the tanks on the soft sand, but not simply these: a good part of the blame would be cast on... the XX Italian Corps, whose slowness had hindered a more harmonious operation.

Some clarification is necessary at this point. According to Rommel, the assigned objectives were "*Hill 132 for the DAK and Alam Bueib-Alam Halfa for the XX Italian Corps*". Premised that the objective for De Stefanis is expressed very inaccurately and the relief has two levels, Hill 132 of Alam el Halfa and Hill 120 of Alam el Bueib, it is a fact that the XX Corps' historical diary reports something completely different:

"At 8:30 Marshal Rommel, having met with H.E. De Stefanis at the *Ariete* Division and having been updated on the situation, ordered the army corps to flank the *Ariete* Division to the left of the *Littorio* Division and to attack at 12:00 hours having the positions of Hill 102 (5 kilometres northeast of Manaqir el Taiyara) as attack direction".

As for the phonogram transmitted at 8:15 by the AIT, its text reads:

"The CTA will attack at 12:00 towards zone 473 right 10-457 left 12. The XX Army Corps will take part in the attack circling to the left of the CTA",

and at 10:15 it was followed by the following: *"Attack at 13:00 hours. CTA to the right. XX Corps to the left. Contact line: 471 right 13 - 152 right 45"*. It would be left to hypothesize a change in the assignment of objectives made by Rommel after the meeting with De Stefanis and a wrong interpretation of the references on the part of the XX Corps, which seems rather improbable.

Furthermore, it can be admitted that a concentrated effort by the XX Corps and the DAK against Hill 120 and Hill 132 would seem more logical, but on a practical level they would have seen the 22nd Armoured Brigade arrive on top of them from the west and the 8th Armoured Brigade from the east. In any case, the DAK was launched on an attack objective *different* from the one prescribed: Hill 102 instead of Hill 132 of Alam el Halfa.

Unfortunately, the XX Corps had suffered notable vicissitudes from the very start. The *Ariete's* vehicles started crossing *January* at 11:00, assuming a column formation. The consequent excessive depth of the column and the inevitable snarl-ups made it so that the entire division did not get beyond the minefield until 17:00. In the meantime, De Stefanis had had the *Littorio* proceed, which, after having overcome a third minefield quickly recognised as dummy, brought itself east of Deir el Muhafid. When Rommel's order to halt reached it, the *Ariete* was drawn up to the dummy minefield and the *Trieste* found itself with the bulk of its forces immediately west of *February*. The losses of the Corps amounted to 46 dead or wounded, two medium tanks out of combat and 14 damaged, 10 light tanks and 2 self-propelled damaged and 15 vehicles destroyed. The *Littorio* still had 92 medium tanks at its disposal, the *Ariete* 120 and the *Trieste* 17.

On the left, the 90th Light had reached the northern edge of Deir el Muhafid, that is to say, practically, its objective.

It is now necessary to mention the outcome of the efforts carried out by the X and XXI Corps. The most important action was the one organised by the *Brescia*. Eight battalions were engaged in it: the column on the left, composed of the I and the II/19th Infantry, the XXVII/9th *Bersaglieri* and the V/186th Paratrooper and covered by the II/185th Artillery from the *Folgore*, had to aim south of Deir Anqar; the column on the right, composed of the IX and X/187th Paratrooper and two German paratrooper battalions and supported by the III/185th Artillery (*Folgore* Division) had to head north of Deir Alinda. The sector against which the attack was about to be launched seemed to be the responsibility of General Freyberg, who hastened to take the command of the 2nd New Zealand again once he had recovered from a wound he suffered during the battle for Tobruk. The front was held by the 132nd British Infantry Battalion, which was part of the 44th Infantry Division, but temporarily assigned to Freyberg, and by the 6th New Zealand Infantry Battalion drawn up between Ruweisat and Alam Nayil. The 5th Infantry Battalion was garrisoned here and it was the sector hinge, even if eccentric. Further to the rear, north of Deep Well, the 2nd New Zealand Cavalry was detached, equipped with armoured cars and *Stuarts*. There was a squadron of the 46th *Royal Tanks* in reserve with 13 *Valentines* and two *Mathildas*, reinforced with some minor units. It was a formation that was completed between the 28th and the 30th of August, just after the arrival of the 132nd Infantry Battalion had made the 5th New Zealand Infantry Battalion available as reinforcement for the southern flank of the static defences.

The task entrusted to Freyberg was also linear: to remain in place even if overcome and surrounded by Rommel's manoeuvre. A lot of security, in reality, was derived from the thought that the enemy would be forced to cross the Alinda, Munassib, Muhafid and Ragil Depressions, all difficult to pass and excellent objectives for air attacks.

This said, the action of the two *Brescia*'s columns remains to be explained. The objective had been indicated since 20 August. Nevertheless, it was thought that it would be necessary to sustain an unavoidable struggle, assuming that the 6th Brigade had been tasked with garrisoning Alam Nayil and the 5th Brigade with blocking the area of interest. Since, as we know, Freyberg's troops did not have any responsibility south of Alam Nayil, the two parallel efforts slid along the southern mar-

gin of the *box* leaving the New Zealanders completely indifferent, with the exception of the artillery[80]. They engaged the II Battalion of the Rifle Brigade and the II of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps,* but it was not hard to occupy the borders of Deir El Anqar (19th Infantry) and Deir Alinda (187th Paratrooper), as planned.

In the XX Corps' sector, the *Bologna* against Ruweisat, the *Trento* from the Sanyet el Miteiriya sector and the 164th German Infantry Division further north performed the planned patrol activities: some losses, some prisoners, but one could not really call it "securing". The adversary paid back the patrol visits with analogous results.

The evening of the 31st Rommel wanted to gather the forces. Not only was he suddenly aware that the hopes for success grew slimmer, but he was ever more worried about the fuel situation in the rear area and he started to expect the response of the 8th Army. Therefore, in the late evening, he ordered to take measures to face enemy counterattacks in the course of the following day. "*So deploy the artillery carefully. Every unit dig trenches, decentralise the vehicles*", he specified to the 90th Light and the XX Corps. For the DAK, on the other hand, he considered a reiteration of the effort.

On the other side of the hill, Alexander and Montgomery had followed the development of the events with extreme attention. While it was established to bring the 8th Army closer to the battlefield, moving it from east of Cairo to west of the Delta, Montgomery set the guidelines for 1 September. The *Desert Air Force,* including three fighter squadrons of the 9th American Air Force, had to execute heavy air attacks on the DAK, which had been foreseen to pass the night at rest in the Deir el Ragil area, as well as on the El Daba and Sidi Haneish landing strips east of Matruh. The firm possession of their respective positions was confirmed to the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division and the 44th British Infantry Division. The 10th Armoured Division, to which the 23rd Armoured Brigade was added, was concerned with preserving Hill 102, preventing the Germans from deploying an anti-tank formation between the 8th and the 22nd Armoured Brigade and keeping each brigade from being defeated separately. Finally,

[80] At about 1:00 hours on 31 August, Gen Kippenberger, commander of the 5th New Zealand Brigade well organised in defence at Alam Nayil, was informed that Axis troops had started to force the southern minefields. He also heard shooting further north, in the direction of Ruweisat, but the thing, at least for the moment, could not involve him. He thought it over and concluded that the brigade was ready. *"So I went back to sleep"*, he wrote later, *"and I slept well, despite the fact that for all the rest of the night our guns continued non-stop to pond the corridors in the minefields"* (H. KIPPENBERGER , *op. cit.*, p. 206).

the 7th Armoured Division, erroneously thought to be in control of Samaket Gaballa, was entrusted with the task of acting against the Axis itineraries for supplies.

The 1st of September

The rising sun found the DAK a bit shaken because the Desert Air Force had raged throughout the night, hitting and burning vehicles at rest and in movement and small fuel depots. The difficulties encountered by the supply columns had many serious repercussions on the course of the battle, so much so that they led Rommel to decide,

> "already in the morning of 1 September, to abstain from major operations, because grand style manoeuvres with the motor units had to be avoided. At most, we could allow ourselves some local attacks"[81].

Also in von Mellenthin's opinion, the delay, more than a true interruption of the supplies, put the DAK in a difficult situation both for itself and for the entire operation:

> "In the morning of 21 September, the lack of Rommel's fuel was such that he was forced to limit the attack on Alam el Halfa to the 15th *Panzerdivision*. It was clear that a frontal attack offered little hope of success and, in other circumstances, Rommel would have certainly turned east to undermine the British position. In any case, the lack of petrol prevented every attempt at manoeuvring"[82].

As a consequence, while the 21st *Panzer* was standing in the Deir el Tarfa zone, at 6:40 the 15th moved alone against Alam el Halfa. At 10:52 De Stefanis received a triumphant message from the Army Headquarters: "*The 15th Armoured Division took Hill 132 at 8:45*". Unfortunately, the news was without any foundation. Neither the task or the objectives assigned to the 15th *Panzer* are known; in any case, it is extremely strange that it would face the 44th British Infantry Division alone, which at that point was spotted on the ridge, and that it would adventure between the 8th Armoured Brigade, whose existence was already known because of the

[81] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
[82] F. VON MELLENTHIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-176.

intervention of the previous afternoon, and the 22nd Armoured Brigade, that was known to be well-arranged on Hill 102 by direct experience.

The result was that the division first headed against the left flank of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, renewing the attempt of 31 August, then, having seen the 8th Armoured appear, it faced the latter. Nevertheless, after a brief clash and when he thought, deluding himself, that the action was moving towards a happy outcome, von Randow realised with horror that his tanks had enough petrol for just another forty kilometres. So, unable to replenish in front of the Alam el Halfa structures, under the extremely violent fire of the British battery, he abandoned the field.

Excluding the hypothesis of an attempt carried out just hoping, unjustifiably, for an unpredictable result, the most likely explanation can be found in Bayerlein's admission, "*The strength of the defence on the Alam el Halfa hill was truly a surprise to me. I was sure of being able to overcome it and insisted too long on a useless attack*"[83].

The setback imposed further modifications to the initial plan. At midday, Rommel had ordered De Stefanis, summoned to the AIT Tactical Headquarters and brought up to date about how things were developing, to draw up the XX Corps with the *Ariete* and the *Littorio* on the Deir el Muhafid (northern border) - Qabr Hani Zada alignment and the *Trieste* in second formation, as it was his intention to "*attack at 17:00 hours to reach the zone 5 km north of the currently occupied positions*", that is to bring it up to the height of Deir el Hima - Hill 102[84]. Evidently, a new isolated effort was unthinkable, so it is no wonder that, at 18:00, De Stefanis received the order not to begin the attack he had made preparations for, but rather to replace the *Ariete* with the *Trieste* during the night, so that the former made itself available as army reserve. At 22:45 the confirmation to organise a defence in place reached the AIT Headquarters, while preserving itself to some degree to resume the offensive northwards[85].

There can certainly be no doubt about a temporary supply crisis, yet the doubt appeared on 1 September. Not just petrol, perhaps it was more about the fact that Rommel, sick and worried, was not confident to be able to dominate such a difficult tactical situation.

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[83] D. YOUNG, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

[84] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps dated 1/9/1942.

[85] The commander of the *Littorio* noted in his diary: *"To our surprise and disappointment, at about 17:00 [?], while we were about to launch an attack, having regulated everything with that goal, the unexplainable order arrived to suspend the attack and reinforce ourselves in place"* (C. CERIANA MAYNERI, *op. cit.*, p. 122).

Montgomery, on the other hand, had finally shaken off the initial uncertainty. At that point, he was convinced of an enemy attack towards Alam el Halfa (as desired) and no longer to the east towards El Hammam. While at first the 10th Armoured Div. was left with its two brigades in a forward position with respect to the ridge, it could now gather the approximately 400 tanks of the 8th, the 22nd and the 23rd Brigades between Alam el Halfa and Alam Nayil, ready to intervene against a massive Italo-German effort. Then the 2nd South African Infantry Brigade moved north of Alam al Halfa, on an already arranged position. The 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, with the 7th Heavy Field Artillery and the 49th Anti-tank Artillery, abandoned the eastern slopes of Ruweisat, where it was relieved by the 1st South African Infantry Brigade, and took over the northern sector of the *box* from the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Brigade. The 151st Infantry Brigade of the 50th Infantry Division was called from the rear.

In the meantime, on the 9th Australian Infantry Division's front, Operation *Balimba* had ended: an incursion that had been planned for some time, to be launched as soon as Rommel's offensive took shape, with the aim of creating a breach, if possible, to reach the AIT's supply line in the sector immediately south of Tell El Eisa. At 5:30, after a quarter of an hour of preparation by two field artillery regiments and a heavy field battery and with the support of daytime air bombing, the II/15th Battalion of the 20th Australian Infantry Brigade, supported by a squadron of the 40th *Royal Tanks*, moved an attack onto Hill 25 of Tell el Eisa, held by the III/382nd German Infantry. The struggle, that also involved divisions of the II/62nd of the *Trento* with fire, lasted more than three hours, but at 9:00 General Windeyer, commander of the Australian brigade, ordered the withdrawal with nothing accomplished. The Australians had 39 killed, 109 wounded and 25 prisoners and lost seven *Valentines*. The Germans, it seems, had about a hundred between dead and wounded and 140 prisoners.

The unfolding of events started to ripen ideas for a counterattack on a general scale in Montgomery. His plan, communicated to Ramsden and Horrocks in the afternoon, contemplated the establishment of a reserve by the 30th Corps, the gradual closing of the space between Alam Nayil and Qaret el Himeimat by the infantry of the 13th Corps and a concrete adjustment of the 10th Corps (General Lumsden), that in due time would assume control of all of the units in reserve to push up to El Daba with them. It dealt with a project sketch, also because the Italo-German offensive did not appear to be struck down despite the continuous and heavy incursions by the *Desert Air Force* and the frightening volume of British artillery fire.

Rommel was tenser then ever. The DAK continued to be particularly targeted and the losses were significant. In that one day, the *Afrikakorps* Headquarters had lost seven officers. *"Again"*, he said, *"I wondered if, in view of the ugly logistic situation, I should suspend the battle"*. The Axis inferiority in the air had become obvious at that point and the few fighter groups were engaged by the stronger adversary units as soon as they appeared to oppose the wave of British bombers. The British artillery also seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of ammunition at its disposal. In short, *"it no longer seemed possible to move large formations and establish the speed of the march beforehand"*, Rommel had to declare. And the fuel issue was truly taking on disquieting aspects.

On 30 August he had begun the offensive trusting in a telegram from the Supreme Command:

> "(...) About fuel, movements underway permit forecasting the arrival by 3 September of another five thousand tons for German units. Delay of an apportion that was forecasted to arrive the 1st is due to loss at sea and late communication by the German side of two steamers at Piraeus.
> About ammunition, estimated arrival of 1,500 tons by the 2nd and 1,100 tons by the 5th.
> All these predictions, as with the preceding, are not insurances of arrival but prediction of cargo departure and movement, which enemy offensive naturally cuts into and which obligates a continuous battle for every transport, as it has been repeated more than once (...)"[86].

And the news of the sinking of the *Sant'Andrea* with 1,300 tons of petrol for the Germans, which happened right on the 30th, was not compensated by Cavallero's assurance, through *Delease,* that *"immediate measures have been taken to accelerate fuel transport to the utmost. It is thought that the measures adopted will allow for the resolution of this delicate problem"*.

The worries did not concern the Germans only. That day General Palma, North Africa Quartermaster, indicated to Barbasetti that, including the undelivered escorts, where the AIT was concerned, he had petrol available until 3 September and diesel until the 14th, adding, *"From today on I have had to suspend the shipping of petrol due to insufficient availability"* and *"if petrol does not arrive by tomorrow morning for the Logistic Headquarters to assure another two days of consumption beyond 3*

[86] DSCS, telegram 32198/Op. dated 29/8/1942, 22:00 hours.

September, i.e. until 5 September included, it will be necessary to take another 100 tons as further loan from the Germans and another 100 tons or more to be obtained from the Air Force". In short, Palma concluded, given the evident impossibility of going forward relying on loan, it would be worth sending barrels to Africa by submarine. Even the daily input of 60-70 tons could help to overcome the critical moment[87].

It is said that night brings counsel, but the night of 2 September brought more long hours of air bombings by *Wellingtons* and *Albacores*, which dropped 4,000 pound bombs and numerous Bengal lights that illuminated the battlefield as bright as day.

The 2nd of September

In the late morning, Rommel resigned himself to deciding to suspend the offensive and retreat step by step to the Bab el Qattara - El Taqa positions. "*The attack could no longer achieve a breakthrough*", he recognised[88]. At 14:30 he went to the XX Corps Headquarters and communicated to De Stefanis the hard necessity of withdrawing west of *February*, the most forward British minefield. The movement would take place in echelons and in stages, considering the activity of the 4th Light Armoured Brigade on the exposed flank and at the back of the DAK and the XX Corps[89]. It is certain that not all of the units were aware of the situation. Ceriana Mayneri for example was completely perplexed:

> "In the morning [?], General De Stefanis, having called me to his command post, communicated that our action had a demonstrative character: it was offensive reconnaissance in force!... So, it should be considered over by then. He tried to explain the reasons for this strange halt to me, attributed to the scarcity of German fuel (if this was the case, we knew it before we started!), the considerable losses suffered and the strenuous adversary resistance still not entirely dented and definitely

[87] Historical diary of *Delease*, telegram 1/2656/SM dated 1/9/1942, 16:30 hours, by the North Africa Logistic Headquarters. An observation made by *Supermarina* could be of interest: to send a torpedo-boat destroyer with 50 tons of petrol in barrels 400 tons of diesel was consumed.

[88] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

[89] According to British sources, a column from the 4th /8th *Hussars* surprised 300 vehicles a few kilometres east of Qaret el Himeimat in the morning, destroying 57 of them. Since the XX Corps indicated an incursion against the *Trieste's* truck transport with eleven vehicles destroyed or damaged, either the assessment of the 4th Armoured Battalion was exaggerated or else vehicles from the DAK were also attacked.

superior to our offensive possibilities! But De Stefanis himself did not seem convinced to me..."[90].

The reactions were also of incredulity among the men of the *Ariete* and *Trieste,* above all about one point: how could Rommel have started the offensive without petrol?

Kesselring arrived at the Army Headquarters at 17:30. In those days, he had followed the battle closely without hiding his clear inclination towards the continuation of the offensive. Rommel showed him an exhaustive picture of the disastrous efficiency of the *Desert Air Force* incursions and the extremely serious supply crisis and invoked an intervention against both of these scourges. The latest news regarded the sinking of the *Picci Fassio* and the probable loss of the *Abruzzi* 40 miles from Derna. There were not any alternatives. It seems that Kesselring tried to dissuade Rommel from giving up continuing and objected that such a serious decision ran into a political-military field that laid outside of the powers of the AIT Commander. But Rommel remained firm in his purpose and did not change his mind even at Kesselring's promise, kept, to intervene with all of his air transport.

In the evening, he communicated his decision to the Supreme Command through Mancinelli. The availability of fuel, from the ports of landing to the army, totalled three units in all, therefore at best they could face the needs until 5 September. Of the 5,000 tons declared to be in arrival, 2,600 had already been sunk and even if the *Bianchi* and *Sportivo* steamers arrived in the port of Tobruk the next day, the petrol that they transported (three units) would not arrive to the army before the 7th. Apart from this, precise operational reasons led to the painful decision. Unfortunately, the unknown existence of numerous minefields had delayed the advance and ruined the surprise, essential element for the success of the plan, and then the continuous enemy air attacks, day and night, had sharply decreased the combat power of the troops. In conclusion "*the army will therefore retreat to the departure positions, gradually, under enemy pressure, unless the supply and air situations change radically*"[91].

The evacuation of the occupied area had to begin on the 3rd, with the withdrawal of the bulk of the 90th Light and the *Littorio*. The evacuated

[90] CERIANA MAYNERI C., *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

[91] DSCS, ph. 107/Sec. dated 2/9/1942, 22:30 hours, by Gen. Mancinelli.

positions would be temporarily entrusted to units of the *Trieste* and the 21st *Panzer* respectively. Then, in echelons, the other divisions would retreat.

Montgomery made his usual inspection visit at the Corps Headquarters in the afternoon. He was very satisfied with the progress of events. The first two days of combat had passed without any concrete advantage on the part of Rommel. Furthermore, the *Enigma* decryptions reported that the Axis' supply program had been further devastated by the sinking of the *Sant'Andrea* and the *Royal Air Force* had communicated the sinking of the *Picci Fassio* and huge damage inflicted on the *Abruzzi*. The adversary's reluctance to pursue the offensive was clear, such as to make one think about a change in tactics: instead of continuing the struggle, Rommel had probably opted for a defensive attitude intended to provoke a British counterattack.

In any case, even after verifying that the AIT position started to look precarious, Montgomery refused to fall in the "trap" and limited himself to ordering Horrocks to "*destroy the enemy's means of transport and to gradually, but methodically, close the sack*" by pushing Freyberg four-five kilometres southwards. The following day he would send the 151st Infantry Brigade to disengage one of the New Zealand brigades and allow Freyberg, two days later, to get even closer to Qaret el Himeimat.

At about dusk, the 4th/8th *Hussars* tried to repeat the raid against the enemy vehicles east of Qaret el Himeimat, but this time the British met up with a tank battalion and a group of 75/18 self-propelled guns from the *Ariete* that repelled them with losses.

The 3rd of September

The general situation had urged the adoption of precautionary measures necessary to protect the DAK's exposed flank and the immediate zone behind the line. Once the retreat had been decided, the 15th *Panzer* received orders to rotate southwest hinging on the 21st, while elements of the recce group had to defend the mass of the manoeuvre from attacks coming from south and southeast. During the morning of 3 September, the Italo-German formation had assumed the aspect of a huge salient with its back resting on the large English minefields: the *Brescia* up to Deir El Anqar; the *Ramcke* Brigade on the right; the 90th Light at Deep Well; the *Trieste* at Deir el Muhafid, the *Littorio* at Qabr Hani Zada, all facing north; the 21st *Panzer* followed at Deir el Tarfa facing north and east; the 15th *Panzer* of Samaket Gaballa, facing east; the recce group southwest of the 15th up to Qaret el

Himeimat, facing south. The *Ariete* was in reserve, southeast of Deir el Munassib (Sketch N. 28). Montgomery intended to cut off the salient at the base, leaving from Alam Nayil and proceeding slowly towards Qaret el Himeimat. Rommel wanted to evacuate without precipitating the situation.

Before 8:00, Montgomery ordered avoiding every temptation to launch swift attacks. Only patrols could be instructed to destroy targets of opportunity such as groups of enemy vehicles. Calm reigned supreme until about midday, when the *Desert Air Force*, which persevered in its action, reported three large columns of Axis vehicles in retreat towards the minefields. The 7th Armoured Division was immediately tasked with acting on the southern flank of the adversary, but the 7th Motor Brigade was engaged east of Deir el Ragil against the 15th *Panzer* and the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, of which many guns and vehicles were stuck in the soft sand, was not able to get anything done against the Italo-German recce units.

Rommel's message arrived completely unexpected in Rome. Nobody, it seems, was aware of how things really were in Africa. On 1 September, Cavallero had received General Marras, entrusting him with safeguarding Italy in Berlin: the troops that would enter Alexandria and Cairo had to be Italian and German and not just German. The matter took on great importance since it dealt with *"safeguarding the prestige of the Italians that had fought the first battle in the Mediterranean"*.

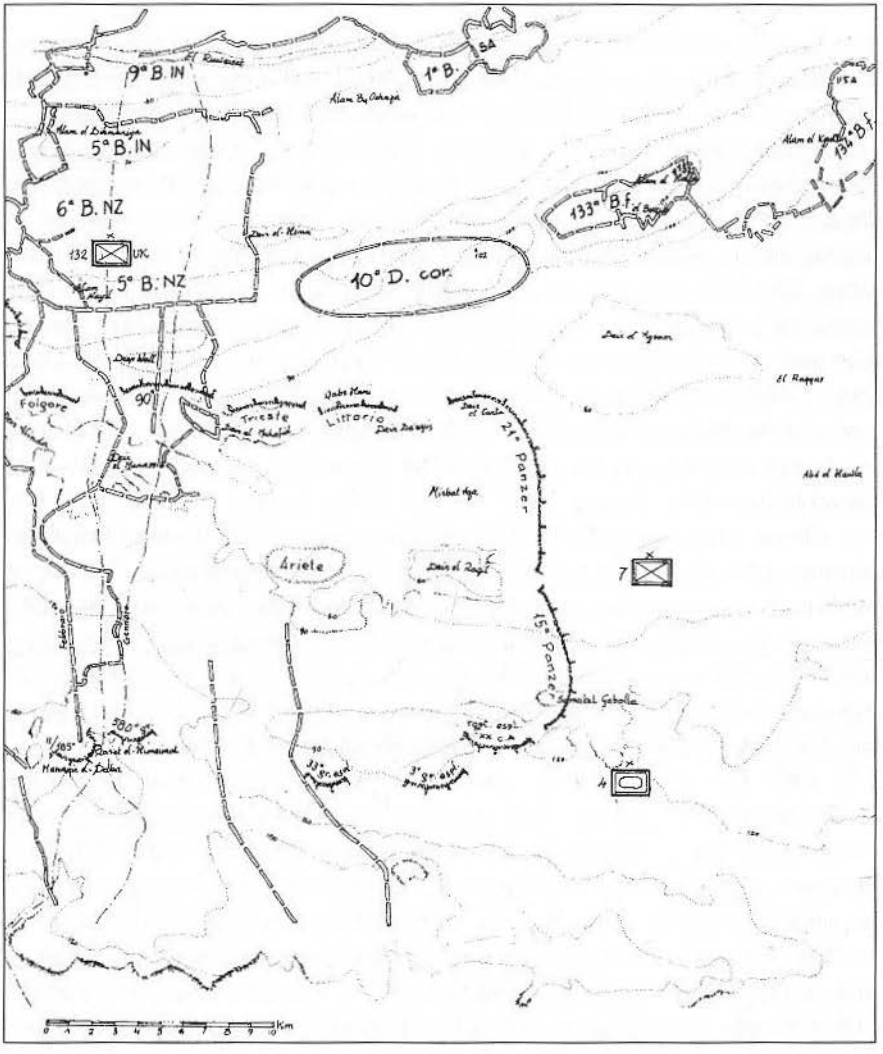
The morning of the 2nd, learning of the fate of the *Picci Fassio* and the *Abruzzi*, Cavallero took control of the departure of other steamers that same day with 2,770 tons of petrol for the Germans and more than 1,000 for the Italians, and decided to send two officers of the Supreme Command overseas to

> "(...) raise the spirits of those who are in Libya, because I understand the news about the sinking of the tankers could be alarming. Petrol will arrive on the 4th and 5th and also in the following days. We will keep the Tatoi planes available, keeping their numbers up and drawing from Lecce if necessary. The measures of the Supreme Command will save the situation. The fuel will arrive better when it is not in tankers"[92].

However the extent of the seriousness of Rommel's communication was not acknowledged. In fact Cavallero's answer, written out after an assessment of the situation made with Mussolini at noon on the 3rd, was optimistic:

[92] Cavallero's diary, dated 2/9/1942.

Sketch N. 28
"THE AIT SITUATION IN THE MORNING OF 3 SEPTEMBER"



"Duce acknowledges your determination to suspend attack. He communicates that supplies will be intensified as much as possible to make the Italo-German Army able to repel possible enemy attack and victoriously pass to a counterattack. In the meantime, I draw your attention to a possible attempt by the enemy on Siwa"[93].

[93] DSCS, telegram 32249/Op. dated 3/9/1942, 13:55 hours.

Not a single word about the AIT's operational insufficiency in front of the 8th Army.

In the afternoon of 3 September, two officers from the Supreme Command showed up, one, Major Pistotti, at the armoured army headquarters, the other, Major Patti, at the Supreme Command Delegation.

Major Pistotti conferred with the Chief of Staff, General Gause, and showed him the fuel shipping plan. On the western route, three steamers should arrive between 11 and 14 September with 621 tons of petrol in drums for the Army, 390 for the Air Force and 1,000 for the German divisions. The following petrol cargos were planned on the eastern route: four ships on 5 September with 1,300 tons for the Italians and 3,000 for the Germans; five between the 7th and the 9th with 1,650 tons for the Italians and 2,740 for the Germans; three between the 12th and the 13th with 2,200 tons for the Italians and 1,200 for the Germans. Furthermore, 1,000 tons of aircraft fuel was planned between the 9th and the 12th and 1,200 tons of diesel between the 3rd and the 5th for the Italian forces.

Gause quickly summarised the negative factors that imposed the interruption of the operation: lack of fuel, due to the missing arrivals, but above all to a consumption that was three times the normal, caused by the sandy terrain in the attack zone; lack of surprise due to the slow down caused by numerous and vast minefields; the awesome power of the *Royal Air Force,* especially at night. The enemy air incursions did not allow them to stay on the positions reached; it was necessary to advance or retreat. Advancing with little fuel meant finding oneself lacking in the moment the enemy would be engaged and therefore exposing oneself to defeat. There was no other choice but to retreat. The movement was underway without British pressure, gradually and in relation to the need for recovering damaged material. The line of arrest had not been established yet. It could turn out to be that of departure, or else the opposite, between the enemy minefields, that could then be exploited without cost. An eventual resumption of the offensive was subordinate to overcoming the current serious fuel crisis and, in second place, the establishment of adequate escorts. However, it would not be sooner than two months (October moon) and it remained to be seen if the 8th Army had not taken the initiative in the meantime.

In short, Major Pistotti wrote in the report that the sharp German disappointment in the failure of the undertaking was apparent, for which a victorious outcome was never doubted, combined, however, with faith in future possibilities. And another thing was also apparent: that the Germans did not doubt the good will of the Italians, but were convinced that the

organisation and execution of the fuel transports were not exempt from errors capable of frustrating any sacrifice[94].

Major Patti learned the Italian situation from *Delease:* sufficient fuel until the 6th, thanks to a loan of 600 tons from the Germans and 50 from the Air Force, but... by reducing the supply to the major formations by 50% (left with little or nothing); diesel sufficient until 19 September. Although, two opinions of *Delease* left uncertain: that the Logistic Headquarters could "*cope with every necessity*" with the vehicles it had available and, in consequence, the precedence of the shipments should go to the major formations; that it would be necessary to "*increase shipments to Tripoli*", especially vehicles, ammunition, foodstuff, and apportions of fuel. No doubt about the desperate needs of the army corps and divisions with regards to vehicles, but the affirmation of the full fitness of the Logistic Headquarters seems a bit too peremptory, when one remembers that it had concentrated part of the divisional vehicles into its own hands and that *Superlibia* found itself in serious difficulty. As far as sending goods earmarked for the AIT to Tripoli was concerned, in those circumstances it was like not sending them to Africa at all.

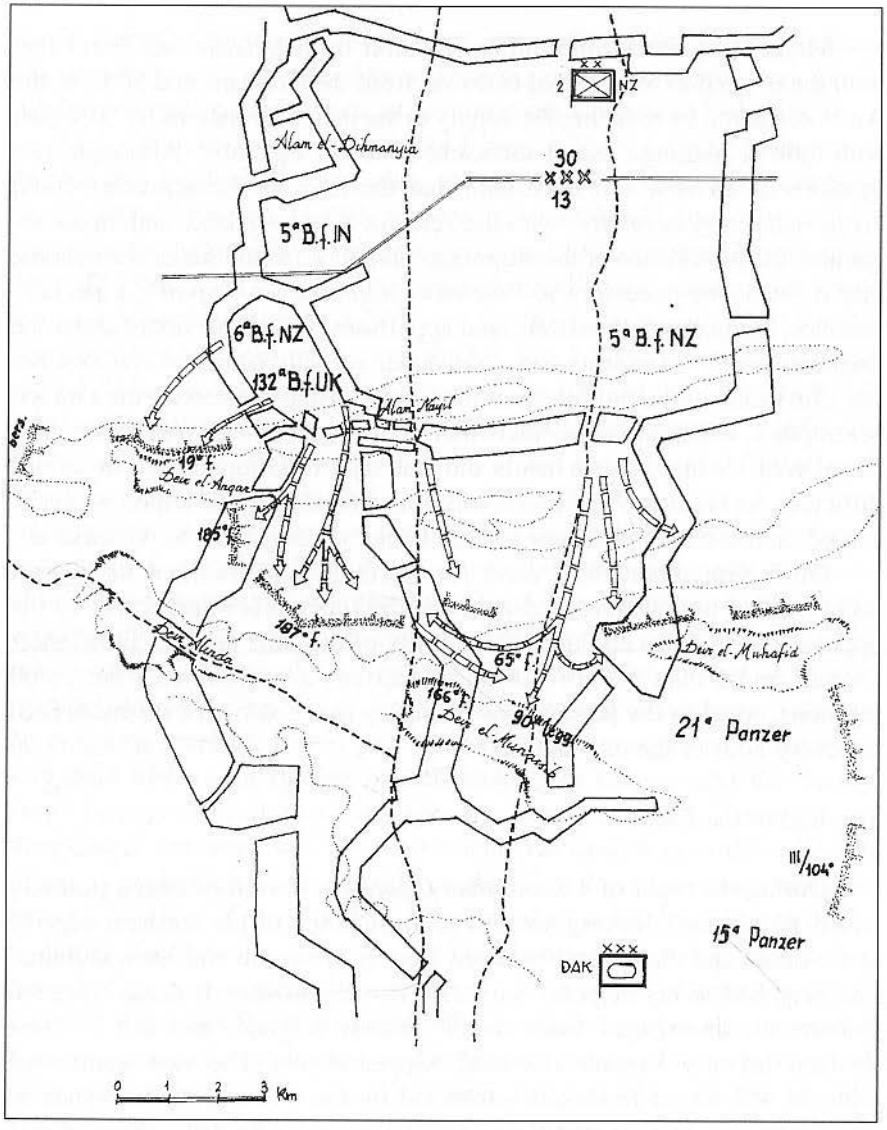
On 3 September, the *Desert Air Force* activity reached its highest point for that period, favoured above all by the relative immobility of the opposing formations and the vulnerability of the Axis units to air offence. Overall, more than 500 British and American aircraft carried out 2,700 missions, equal to the presence of 35 planes in the sky over the battlefield for every hour of the day and night.

The End of the Battle

During the night of 4 September Operation *Beresford* began (initially called *Wellington*), leaning towards an occupation of the northern edge of Deir Alinda and the ground between Deir el Munassib and Deir Mufahid. Freyberg had at his disposal the 132nd British Infantry Brigade (General Robertson), disengaged from the 5th Indian Brigade, and the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade (General Kippenberger). The first, reinforced with the 46th *Royal Tanks* and supported by the 4th Field Artillery, had to attack between *January* and *February*; the second, with the 5th *Royal Tanks* and the 6th Field Artillery, between the third and fourth minefield (Sketch N. 29). The attack sector had an overall width of about five kilometres.

[94] Investigations by *Delease* were underway about the incident with the *Gamma* transport, which, having arrived with 350 tons of diesel, only unloaded 120.

Sketch N. 29
"OPERATION *BERESFORD* (NIGHT OF 4 SEPTEMBER)"



The depth of the objectives was around six kilometres. An intervention by the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade (General Clifton) against Deir El Anqar, intended to distract the attention of the Axis and protect the eastern flank of the 132nd Infantry Brigade, would facilitate the enterprise. The plan had undergone many revisions, however, as it had now been

definitively approved, it seemed to Freyberg to promise "*good results*". In reality, it ended up being a remarkable fiasco.

Even the preliminaries had not been exactly brilliant. In the late evening of the 3rd the concentration of the troops around Alam Nayil became enough to provoke great confusion and cause the beginning of the attack to be moved. In part for this, in part for organisational short-sightedness, the phases of the operation unfolded more or less one independent of the other and graduated in time.

The first move was made by the 6th New Zealand which, with the bulk, assailed the Deir al Anqar positions from north, held by the I and II/19th Infantry from the *Brescia*, while an apportion went down south of Alam Nayil and had to coordinate with the action from east. The main effort, started at about 22:00 after an artillery preparation of about 10 minutes, resolved itself in a short time and the New Zealanders retreated with about fifty losses, but also having significantly bruised the I/19th Infantry. The most concrete result, however, turned out to being that all of the Axis troops south of Alam Nayil were put on alert.

The 132nd Brigade headed toward its objectives in a strange formation: the IV and the V *Royal West Kent*, followed by fifteen *Valentines*, moved between the first and second minefield in the direction of the positions held by IX and X/187th Infantry of the *Folgore* and by the *Hubner* Paratrooper Battalion; the II *Buffs* acted in isolation between the second and third minefield with a precarious radio connection, in the direction of the preparations made by the 90th Light. The 26th New Zealand Battalion and part of the 25th were to the right of the 132nd Brigade, with the task of covering the western flank of the British.

The two battalions from *West Kent* did not foresee encountering the enemy until at least the northern margin of Deir Alinda. Therefore, it was a surprise that, at about 23:00, they realised they were a short distance from units of the *Folgore* (the IX and X Paratrooper Battalions numbered a thousand men overall). Moreover, warned that German sappers would have operated in front of the lines to lay stretches of mines during the night, they, too, were caught unaware. The initial moments of the conflict were very confusing. The British tried to increase the disorientation by calling the Italians "*camerati*", infiltrating and eliminating the forward elements of the *Folgore* with bayonets, in hand-to-hand combat. And it is necessary to say that, in general, they were able to create disorder and cause losses. But the response of the defenders rapidly took on consistency, also by taking advantage of the glow of the numerous British vehicles in flames.

After about three hours of fierce fighting, the 132nd British Brigade appeared in serious difficulty. The radio connection with *West Kent* had fallen, the IV *West Kent* indicated that it found itself in desperate conditions. Shortly after, General Robertson was seriously wounded, while the little fragmentary news brought to the Brigade Headquarters by wounded and disbanded soldiers that had turned back, isolated or in small groups, furnished a very depressing picture of the course of the fight.

When, at 4:00 in the morning, Freyberg, who, nonetheless, still did not believe in the failure of the operation, decided to recall the brigade, the *Kents* had lost about a hundred in dead and three hundred prisoners and had abandoned a lot of war material.

The final result was also negative for the 26th New Zealand Battalion. It had been broken up from the beginning of the attack. The company at the lead cut into the left of the X Paratrooper Battalion, arrived at penetrating beyond the Italian positions with many elements (and these elements would cause more than a little trouble during the following day, 4th September), but without achieving very much, nor did things vary when the rest of the battalion got into the game.

Between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning the situation crystallised: groups of attackers left among piles of corpses and vehicle carcasses, shot every once in a while, suddenly awaking the entire sector again. Then patrols of paratroopers started to sally forth from the lines to recover efficient weapons and vehicles lying on the battlefield and take prisoners. In this circumstance, a patrol captured General Clifton, commander of the 6th New Zealand Brigade, with operational documents and marked papers, who had got lost while trying to find his 26th Battalion[95].

[95] Gen. Clifton expressed his mortification to Rommel at having been captured by the Italians. All the more, he stated, that he was on the verge of inducing the paratroopers of the *Folgore* to surrendering, by asserting the presence of strong British armoured divisions in the immediate area. He would have even succeeded in his persuasion, he continued, had a German officer not arrived to frustrate his intention (E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229).

Actually, the presence of a German officer is pure fiction and the Italian officer that stopped Clifton spoke English well and retorted that the paratroopers were there to fight and immediately had the Brigadier escorted to the command post of the 187th Infantry. Col. Camosso, who was wounded some hours later in a conflict with New Zealand elements left isolated and hidden behind the Italian lines, was informed of the capture by his dispatch rider, who told him *"there's a guy out there with a stationmaster cap"*. At first, he hushed the courier, but then the red band typical of a British general's cap came to mind and he then understood and went to meet Clifton. *"He said the same stupid things to me that he had said to the others"*, he commented later, *"but I did not have time to lose; I answered that for the meantime he was a prisoner of the Italian paratroopers and I sent him back to Ramcke"*.

In the meantime, the II *Buffs* had become aware of live combat to its right, pushed patrols up to meet the positions held by the German paratroopers, remained uncertain of what to do being without a connection to the Brigade Headquarters, then at dawn was reached by an order that passed them over to 5th New Zealand Brigade's dependence.

On the other hand, General Kippenberger achieved some success, but the outcome would not be very different. At 22:00 the 5th Brigade headed due south between the third and fourth minefield, with the 28th Maori Battalion to the right and the 21st to the left. It followed a squadron of *Valentines*. The 23rd Battalion was in the second echelon, with part of the 22nd. Initially, no difficulties emerged, but soon a dangerous separation came about: the 21st Battalion deviated eastwards, drawing up along the western side of the fourth minefield, while the Maoris continued in a straight line on their own towards the 90th Light. Between the two battalions, the *Valentines* from the 50th *Royal Tanks*, followed by a division from the 22nd Battalion, proceeded alone, tricked by the German signal flares into thinking they were friendly and intended to indicate the road to follow. Then they went on to run into a minefield protected by the 155th German Infantry, and almost all of them blew up on the mines.

The large Maori column had an adventurous life. First it met up with the 900th German Engineer Battalion; after clearing its way, it headed west, penetrating where it did not find resistance. In its wandering, it ran up against the *Trieste*. It was already organised in defence in the Deir el Muhafid zone and, at 15:30, had received an order to pull back to Deir el Munassib to protect the retreat of the *Ariete* and *Littorio* that was underway, leaving only the stronghold of the 1st Company from the 65th Infantry on site to guard the space between the two minefields, placed to the extreme left of the division, astride the track coming from Alam Nayil. A little before 18:00, the 65th Infantry abandoned Deir al Muhafid and an hour later started to assemble some kilometres south of the 1st Company. At 19:30, it was the 66th Infantry's turn to start the retreat movement towards the new detachment, established west of the 65th Infantry.

The first New Zealand push took shape at about 21:30. It overran the positions held by a German paratrooper battalion from the *Ramcke* Brigade and the 1st Company of the 65th Infantry, and gradually went on to increase in intensity, Then, with the Italian stronghold partly submerged[96], it widened southwards along the track and came into contact with the left

[96] The 1st Company of the 65th Infantry, left surrounded, resisted in place until 4:00 on 4 September, then it opened a corridor and retreated to the regiment with 39 survivors.

of the I/65th Infantry, still in the organisational phase. In the dark, the situation became extremely confused, but the 66th Infantry, arriving from Deir el Muhafid, immediately got into formation west of the 65th, front to the north, closing the dangerous gap existing between the German paratroopers and the 65th Infantry. The fight lasted until dawn, when the attackers were able to disengage under the protection of strong concentrations of artillery. However, the *Trieste* suffered a lot, especially due to the fire of the enemy battery: 140 human losses, 13 vehicles and some divisional arms destroyed.

An apportion of the Maori continued further west, ending up against the extreme right of the IX Battalion of the *Folgore* and here its vehemence ended. Having lost many men and with most of those left, wounded, the small unit turned back to rejoin its battalion.

Overall, including the clearing of the battlefield, the losses for the 187th Parachute Infantry totalled 38 killed (among which the two battalion commanders) and 45 injured (among which the regiment commander).

At dawn, on the 4th, Operation *Beresford* receded. Rommel ordered a vigorous local counterattack by a battalion of the 21st *Panzer* with a company from the *Trieste*. At noon the 5th New Zealand Brigade was pushed back to the north of Deir el Munassib, then the enemy action rapidly extinguished. In the meantime, the *Ariete* and the *Littorio* left two bridgeheads beyond the minefields east of *January* linked with the 3rd and 33rd German Reconnaissance Groups south and west.

The New Zealanders' gain consisted in a couple of kilometres of desert area and the creation of a dangerously exposed salient. A continuation of the effort was originally foreseen, but at 19:20, after a round of reconnaissance of the front, Freyberg dissuaded Horrocks from such an idea and, rather than leaving the troops in position of uncertain security, he proposed a complete retreat. Montgomery, learning of the proposal, approved. The losses from the attack were heavy: 700 men from the 132nd Infantry Brigade, 124 from the 5th Infantry Brigade and 159 from the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade. Freyberg's order of the day said, among other things: "*If we compare our losses with those inflicted on the enemy and evaluate the consequences that our manoeuvre has had on the adversary's plan, we must state that the success of the operation was significant*"[97]. He was evidently alluding to the retreat of most of the AIT's manoeuvre, which actually depended on something all together different and had already been decided before.

[97] M. CARVER, *La Battaglia di El Alamein*, Milan, Baldini e Castoldi, 1964, p. 114.

The renunciation of the offensive left its mark on the Italo-German troops. The annotation that figures in the historical diary of the XX Corps is worthwhile:

> "The brief retreat carried out and the abandonment of some conquered positions has had a large influence on the morale of the troops, making all of the enthusiasm of the first days of the resumed offensive diminish and some men, unaware of the reasons that could have determined the decision to return to the initial positions, have even judged the situation to be serious and precarious".

At 8:00 on 5 September, while De Stefanis was communicating the dispositions for a better defensive organization of the units to his three division commanders, Rommel arrived at the XX Corps Headquarters and announced that the dramatic situation with supplies forced them to assume a defensive stance and that the offensive had been suspended for lack of fuel.

A new line of resistance had to be organised east of the Bab el Qattara - Qaret el Himeimat alignment (Sketch N. 30). The *Trieste*, drawn up between Deir El Anqar and Deir el Munassib (included), would pass to dependence on the X Corps, while responsibility for the sector between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat and also the south front from Qaret el Himeimat, exactly, to Naqb Abu Dweiss would be entrusted to the XX Corps, availing itself of the 187th Paratrooper Infantry (II and IV Battalions) from the *Folgore*, and the V Battalion of the 186th Paratrooper Infantry Headquarters for the latter purpose. The defence to the east had to place itself between the two large minefields, with the *Littorio* to the north and the *Ariete* to the south. The DAK was still east of January for the moment, but it would soon be withdrawn to the rear area and redeployed, placing one division in the north near the sea and the other to the south in the Gebel Kalakh zone. The XX Corps would also pass into reserve as soon as possible. The retreat of the DAK ended on 6 September without excessive trouble from the adversary. Montgomery, who initially had believed in Rommel's intention to return to the departure positions, in the end understood that his antagonist intended to halt at the minefields and at 7:00 on 7 September decided to leave him be. Horrocks protested that in that way not only was the enemy given the British minefields, but also excellent observation points over the 13th Corps sector, but Montgomery explained that Rommel would see all the 8th Army preparations destined to... mislead him about the third future battle of El Alamein[98]. The theory seemed a bit lame, but Horrocks had to be content with it.

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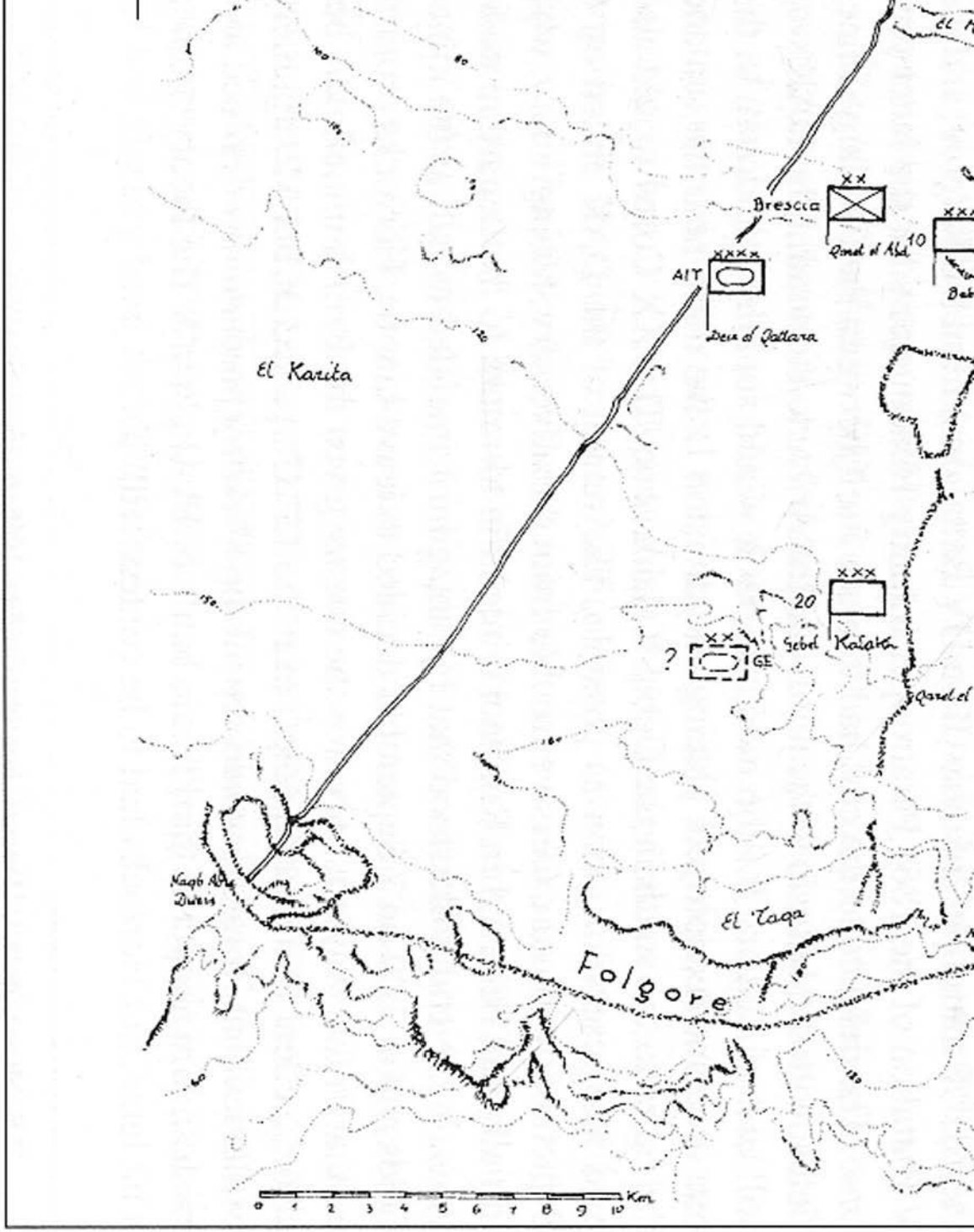
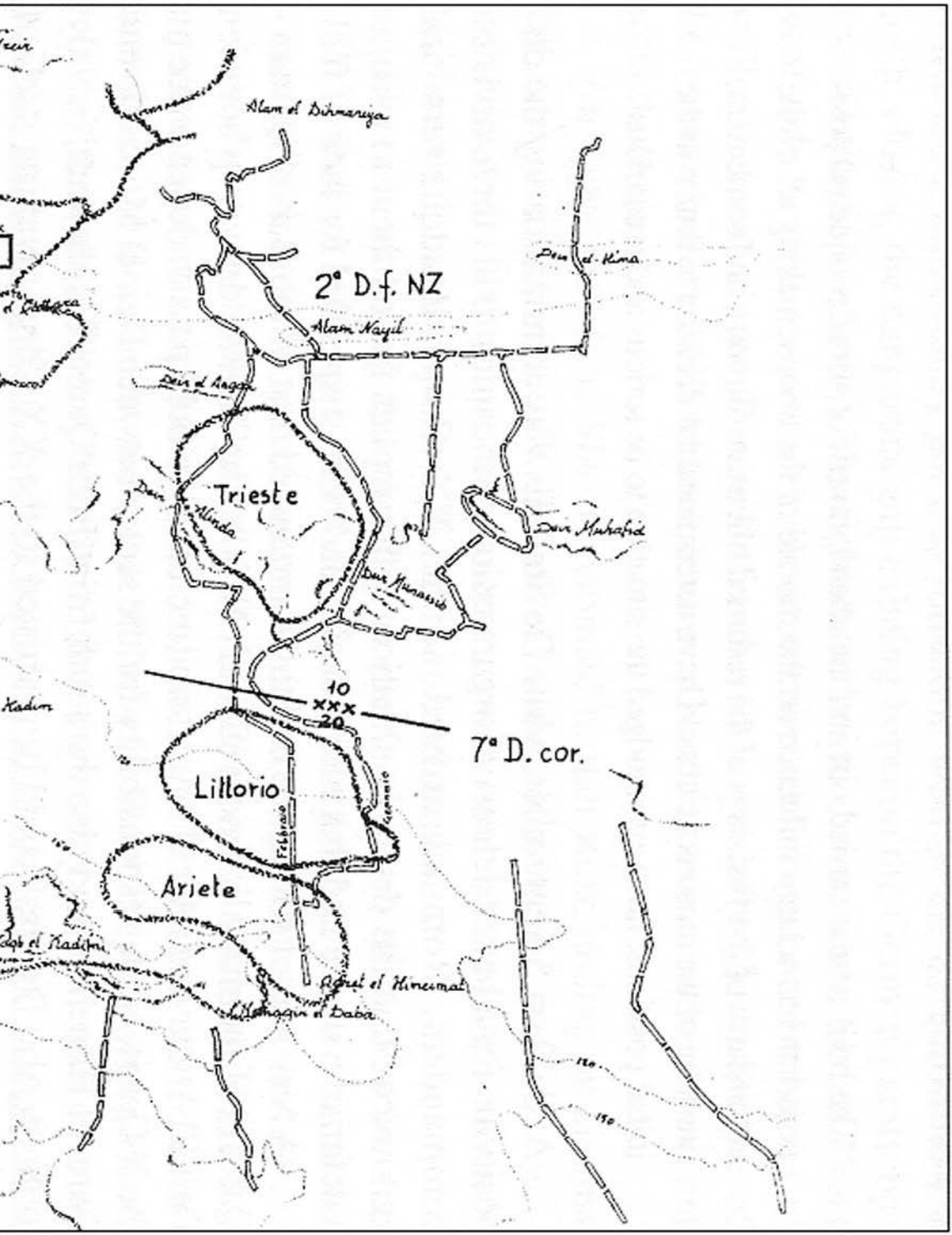
[98] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs*, London, Collins, 1958, p. 10.

Sket

"ROMMEL'S ORDERS FOR A N



ch N. 30
EW FORMATION (6 SEPTEMBER)"



To sum up, the two armies indicated the following losses, taking into consideration the total number of dead, wounded and missing for the personnel and only tanks and motor vehicles for the vehicles destroyed:

AIT

	Ger. (*)	It. (***)	Tot.	8th Army (**)
Men	1,804	1,051	2,855	1,640
Field guns	11	6	17	?
Anti-tank guns	20	16	36	18
Tanks	36	11	47	68
Motor Vehicles	227	97	324	?
Aircraft	36	5	41	68

(*) Data provided by Rommel to the OKW. Alexander in his quoted *Dispatch* stated that 42 German tanks and 11 Italian, almost 700 motor vehicles, 30 field pieces and 40 anti-tank were abandoned on the battlefield.
(**) Data provided by Alexander in his *Dispatch*.
(***) The XX Corps losses between 30 August and 4 September were 59 dead, 228 wounded, and 134 missing; 11 armoured vehicles, 84 motor vehicles, six field pieces and 9 anti-tank.

4. Considerations

There is little to say about the second battle of El Alamein: it was a wrong battle. Rommel talked about it in his notes on the war, but it is preferable to report what he said in the course of an important meeting held with the commanders of the army and division corps on 22 September, before returning to Germany to get cured. In regards to the disappointing offensive, the last on African soil, he stated:

> "(...) We had to interrupt recent offensive operations due to the catastrophic situation with supplies. In a few days many thousands of tons of ships were sunk. The attack was, however, tied to the light of the moon.
> The operations have provided us with useful lessons. Only he who acts with surprise and rapidity can achieve success; it is necessary to cross the minefields in the shortest time possible; every stop due to logistic necessity, like filling the tanks, is damaging. Once the attack has been initiated, it must develop without stops of any kind for refuelling or otherwise; only rapidity can make you suffer fewer losses.

We were obliged to stop to clear the minefields and to effect fuel replenishment; this allowed the adversary to concentrate artillery and aviation against us.

Before the attack, the commanders of German and Italian aviation had assured us that we had nothing to fear from enemy aviation; in reality, its efficiency was not correctly evaluated. The enemy air action was strong; the air raids, day and night, were our nightmare, especially for their effect on morale. I trust that our air forces can obtain analogous effects to the enemy's detriment. Our fighter plane combat was of little consequence; the engagement of *Stukas* turned out to be never-ending. We had to bear repeated air bombings on the same points. The enemy was even able to find his objectives at night. He particularly aimed at 88 mm anti-air cannons.

The army interrupted the offensive and assumed a defensive stance on positions that will be favourable for a future attack. We were able to include the British minefields in our southern positions and hold dominant terrain, which offers us good possibilities for further operations.

I trust that in the next weeks and months we will be able to reinforce the army. The problem is only a matter of supplies. Utmost importance rests in taking control of the Mediterranean. For the moment the army is not receiving enough to live.

We aspire to proceed towards Egypt, but we cannot risk a new offensive now. I shall pass over to the offensive when I have enough to do so; large fuel stores, craft of all kinds and complete efficiency. In the meantime, we shall keep to the defensive. Obviously, the defence will be integrated with offensive spurts here and there, where the enemy offers the opportunity (...)"[99].

However, he seemed aware that "*the last opportunity for occupying the Suez Canal had passed*"[100].

Let's see, or better yet, let's go back again to the subjects presented: surprise, aviation, supplies.

The lack of surprise is ascribed to the minefields, to the delay in the march of the units, especially the XX Corps, and to the knowledge of the plan on the British side. The German Command is clearly responsible for the underestimation of the mined obstacle; the fields were hardly noted in

[99] Historical diary of *Delease*, ph. 2686/Sit. dated 26/9/1942.

[100] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

their dimensions and exact location and no *specific* reconnaissance had been made preventively. It was generally thought they were discontinuous elements of limited obstructive value, not what would represent an obstacle. In consequence, the calculation of time was made by the AIT Headquarters as if it were a simple transfer march from the assembling point to the departure base for the attack (from 40 to 60 kilometres). The doubts formulated by De Stefanis about the lack of time and rigidity were useless: the enemy did not have to be considered and the plan would only be successful by faithfully executing the guidelines. This was the German mental attitude. So at 3:00 on 31 August, when the columns should have reached the departure base side by side and in good order, not even eight kilometres had been covered. And at 5:00, the hour scheduled to initiate the attack, the divisions still found themselves entangled in the minefields, waiting for the slow and arduous flow of the considerable mass of motor vehicles, continuously subjected to the hammering action by the *Desert Air Force*.

On the subject of surprise, unaware of the British decryptions of *Enigma* messages and instead attributing large credit to the intense activity by the British air reconnaissance for the timely detection of the manoeuvre, Rommel did not miss the opportunity to point to something that had already generated heavy doubts towards the Italian ally before, although in an elusive and doubting way. The surprise factor would have failed also and above all because the enemy had received precise indications about the AIT's operational plan. "*Some British even say that their Headquarters was informed of our plan to attack on the southern front by a high rank officer in the Italian Army*"[101]. It is true that Bayerlein considered it necessary to mention that this rumour had never been corroborated by the enemy, but an explanation seems necessary.

On 8 September, Rommel indicated to von Rintelen that British soldiers had stated that they were Italian soldiers, fallen into British hands and much inclined to talk. News of particular value relative to the AIT manoeuvre would be provided by an officer (*higher rank officer* was not mentioned) captured just before the action. Naturally, the Supreme Command asked for the names of the prisoners in question to have them interrogated again and thoroughly by *Delease,* obviously in the presence of a German officer. The AIT Headquarters responded by pre-announcing the arrival of the minutes of the interrogation in Rome by means of Lieutenant Colonel von Mellenthin, who was repatriating, but the only

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 230.

document presented referred to *one* English non-commissioned officer and the statement was in the realm of the most absolute vagueness and generic character. At that point Cavallero, after having tasked General Marras with indicating the event to the OKW, making known that "*the Italian Supreme Command makes no comment and leaves the OKW to judge and act as it best sees fit*"[102], replied dryly to Rommel:

> "Supreme Command has received and examined the interrogation report of the British prisoners transmitted by AIT Headquarters with f. 6706, dated 11 September. On the basis of this examination, the Supreme Command ascertained that the interrogation had not been deepened and, therefore, it lacks the foundations necessary to justify the assertion contained in AIT Headquarters telegram 6179 dated 8 September. The Supreme Command is very sorry that it was not given the possibility of proceeding with a more thorough interrogation of these prisoners now as it was its intention"[103].

As for the second determining element, the preponderance of massive British aviation, there is not much to say. It was a state of fact. Let's remember that the offensive duties in the strategic field were entrusted to the *Egeo* Air Force for the Italians and the X *Fliegerkorps* for the Germans based in Greece. Occasionally, the *Sicilia* Air Force provided reinforcements. For the support of the AIT, on the other hand, according to the agreements stipulated in advance, the engagement of units of the 5th Squadron (East Sector) and of the *Fliegerführer* was coordinated by the latter, that received the ground situation and requests for intervention from Rommel. The availability of aircraft was, as we know, rather limited and furthermore a major recourse to the Italian fighters necessarily made by General Siedeman was cause for more than one worry. In fact, Marchesi wanted to avoid the simultaneous wear of the entire body of fighters, which had no possibility for replacement, as the deliveries of aircraft and engines, which were produced gradually and in small numbers, could not be increased. Moreover, after the planned and already started flow of the 15th Wing in Libya, Fougier specified to Cavallero, "*any increase would not be possible, as no other fighter and assault units exist in the homeland that are ready to be committed*"[104].

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[102] DSCS, Ph. 32450/Secr. dated 15/9/1942.

[103] DSCS, telegram 32470/Op. dated 17/9/1942, 12:30 hours.

[104] DSCS, ph. B/115566 dated 10/8/1942 by *Superaereo*.

Incidentally, beginning in mid-July, the three Italian forward landing fields were in the area west of Fuka and allowed for an adequate decentralisation of the aviation units. The German ones, on the other hand, had pushed even further east, so much so that they required continuous protection by the fighters in their own airspace, and not just on alarm as was the case with the Italians.

Apart from that, the air-ground cooperation between the Air Force and Italian troops seriously suffered from two deficiencies: very little response to the signal flags shown by the units because they were too small, hardly visible and rapidly taking on the colour of the sand; a lack of operational radio networks with the major formations in combat due to the lack of preparation of the army signal personnel. These deficiencies were accentuated by the fact that the cooperation between the Italian Air Force and the Germans was excellent. The latter had widely adopted the use of very efficient violet-coloured smoke bombs and the radio connections worked so well that German requests for intervention were granted, naturally to the detriment of the needs of the Italian divisions.

Rommel complained of having received fallacious guarantees about air support from Marchesi and Seidemann, but it is presumable that he meant to refer to Kesselring. Actually, in the preliminary meetings he was assured that Axis fighters would have always been able to intervene in the skies of the action, in daytime hours, reducing to a minimum, if not nullifying, the danger of intense adversary bombing. Conversely, it was clearly stated that there were not enough aircraft (that is night fighters) to even limit the presence of the enemy during the night. Unfortunately, Coningham's air mass revealed itself to be extremely strong and it raged on the troops, provoking, aside from losses, a nervous wear that in the long term could not but weigh on the aggressiveness of the men and the commanders. It was not for nothing that the bulletin issued by the AIT in the evening of the 1 September reported, among other things: "*Serious air attacks, carried out uninterruptedly day and night, have caused significant losses of personnel and materials, considerably affecting the combative spirit of the troops*".

However, the importance of the "losses" element by the Desert Air Force seems susceptible to downsizing. Rommel affirmed that these losses were "*extraordinarily high*" and Kesselring told of having found out from the *Fliegerführer* that the suspension of the manoeuvre in the morning of the 31st was determined by the fact that Rommel had been "*impressed*" by the violence of the British air offence. Such an explanation is not very convincing since the number of dead and wounded during

the six days seems within the realm of normalcy. It is enough to consider that the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division lost a thousand men in Operation *Beresford* alone. What instead must have negatively influenced Rommel was the havoc on the columns and the continuous state of tension caused by the *Desert Air Force* incursions. When Kesselring stated the set-back was mostly due to psychological reasons, he was certainly also alluding to the British Air Force.

You can immediately add the weight of the artillery to the weight of the enemy planes. It was known for the excellent quality of the material, for its superior range and the way of shooting. To this you can add the unimaginable amount of ammunition available. It is no wonder that, given the intensity of the interventions and the concrete impossibility of a counter-battery from the Italo-German side, it immediately took on an extremely primary role.

The third subject to make reference to is represented by the availability of fuel. The Achilles' heel for the AIT consisted in the vulnerability of the line of communication. Alexander rightly observed that this had never been so precarious and that exact observation led him to intensify air attacks against the Axis ships, and especially the fuel tankers. The repercussions on the offensive were immediate due to the non-existence of a driving force capable of absorbing interruptions in the flow of supplies from the homeland.

In the morning of 1 September, with the advance of the 15th *Panzerdivision* almost up to Alam el Halfa, the tactical situation seemed to be moving towards a happy conclusion for the DAK and AIT Headquarters. In that very moment the petrol crisis presented itself in an extremely serious way. Having left, like the other armoured divisions, with fuel sufficient for about 300 kilometres, the 15th *Panzer* registered enough residual for just 40 kilometres. No possible compensation in the DAK's realm; no hope of quick intervention by the German logistic agencies. In those conditions Rommel was not confident about going on.

Kesselring took a position on the matter. Above all he kept to accepting responsibility for the missing delivery to the AIT of 500 tons of petrol promised after the sinking of the *Sant'Andrea*, with 1,300 tons of petrol for the German units. Only after the war did he find out that that quantity had never arrived at destination (Westphal explained that it was *"consumed on its own"* during the trip to the front), but *"I don't think it was of decisive importance"*, he sustained. And explained:

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[105] DSCS, telegram 32479/Op. dated 17/9/1942, 12:30 hours

> "The fact that all of the motorized forces carried out operations of mobile defence until 6 September using already existing reserves in Africa proves that it had the necessary fuel available to continue the offensive, above all by adding the quantities that had been captured from the enemy"[106].

The reasoning is, at least in part, arguable. It could have merit for demonstrating the inappropriateness of the interruption of the DAK advance, but, objectively, one cannot believe that von Vaerst would have made the decision without a truly dangerous lack of petrol. The fact that there was some *in Africa* was not enough. There needed to be some *on the battlefield*. And, evidently, for 24 hours or even less the DAK was lacking it and we know what value time had in those days. As for pursuing the manoeuvre with captured fuel, it is a rather risky theory. Certainly, the war spoils were largely used in the breaks between fighting, yet a plan cannot be based on the presumed acquisition of enemy warehouses. They are welcome, but they should be considered no more than a reserve.

It is likely that each of the negative factors cited, not to mention the loss of Nehring and Bismarck, had played a part in Rommel's final decision. However, as Mancinelli correctly pointed out, "*For obvious reasons, the General Staff of the AIT then preferred to highlight the fuel factor in particular, outside of its realm of responsibility, so that no emphasis of erred evaluation and short-sightedness could be placed on its post*"[107].

Naturally, one cannot refuse to acknowledge or minimize the limiting meaning of the unavailability of petrol in the German sphere (the Italian tanks were fitted with diesel engines). On the other hand it is undeniable, as is shown by the numerous testimonies previously reported, that the German commanders and General Staffs were convinced of being able to seize another success. Even aware of the fuel troubles; even aware of the incompleteness of the XX Corps, that, among other things, had to leave two-thirds of the infantry and one-third of the artillery at the starting positions; even having reason to believe that the repetition of the manoeuvre layout put into act at Ain el-Ghazala had been foreseen by the 8th Army Headquarters on the basis of a simple examination of a topographical map; even possessing convincing evidence of the superiority of the Royal Air Force; even knowing all this Kesselring, Gause, Nehring, Bayerlein declared they were, in those days or later, confident in the success of the

[106] KESSELRING A., *op. cit.*, p. 180.
[107] MANCINELLI G., *op. cit.*, p. 169.

plan. Rather, it seems there was more confidence in this battle than in that of Ain el-Ghazala. Now Rommel was the most doubtful, and he was strongly affected by the "*certainty that if we had let that full moon period pass without acting, we would have lost the last opportunity for resuming the offensive forever*"[108].

The most pressing criticism of Rommel's attitude was put forth by Kesselring. In his opinion, the victory at Alam el Halfa on 1 September was already *"at hand"* and its suspension offered the enemy a way of recovering. On the basis of this, logically comes the negative comment:

> "When (...) with right or wrong decision - it is not appropriate to express an opinion in these regards now - we were already in the attack phase, the action had to continue without a pause, and without a thought to the losses, so that the troops could overcome the critical moment, make things clear on less dangerous ground and escape the action of the enemy aviation. This iron will to resist was missing; if it had been missing in the beginning, it would have been better not to start an operation where the immense risks were evident. The fact that the operation itself had a good probability of success is demonstrated best by the opinion expressed by Montgomery regarding the difficulties of repressing a German attack in the month of August"[109].

The truth is, victory was *never* at hand and Bayerlein frankly admitted not having even suspected the strength of the preparations ordered by Montgomery at Alam el Halfa. Let's add that Montgomery spoke of the *month of* August, not the *end of* August.

On the enemy side, the battle was laid out and conducted unitarily as it had never been before, providing for the engagement of mass artillery and tanks with strictly general defensive intent. While, then, Rommel put full trust in the slow reactions of the Command of the British troops, this time he met with unexpected immobility. Obviously, this passive stance was only foreseen within certain limits of static defence. Should the armoured mass of the AIT have turned east of Alam el Halfa, in the direction of El Hammam, the 10th Armoured Division would have charged forth with its 400 tanks on the exposed flank and the rear of the Italo-German columns.

For us it was considered a decisive failure because it was obvious that Rommel, not having won, could no longer win, but for the British you can-

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[108] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

[109] A. KESSELRING, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

not speak of a decisive victory. In fact, Montgomery had not launched his tanks against the XX Corps and the DAK stopped south of Alam Halfa; nor had he insisted on severing the salient created by them at the base or attacking the Italo-German mass in retreat to completely annihilate it. Alexander justifies him, reminding us that his motto was: *"No defeats"* or, to put it simply, *"First, don't be beaten!"* Like many other scholars or protagonists, von Mellenthin observed that Montgomery's conduction of the battle was in line with the best English traditions and pointed out a striking parallel to some of Wellington's victories, but *"there is no doubt that he had deliberately missed an excellent opportunity for isolating and destroying the Afrikakorps, when it was left immobilised on 1 and 2 September"*[110].

Montgomery took the criticism and justified himself with two motives. First of all, he was not very satisfied with the level of training of the 8th Army or the available means; secondly,

> "I was not at all anxious about forcing Rommel to disengage and retreat in good order onto the el-Agheila positions [!]. If we had to accomplish a task, it was fundamental to make it so that Rommel stayed in place to fight, to then inflict a decisive defeat on him"[111].

It must be agreed that Montgomery deviced and led his first battle with wise coolness, without any concessions made to the spectacular or the triumphant. It is not for nothing that in a memo issued on 7 September to dependent command posts, he underlined that *"you should not dance to others' music"*[112]. For that matter, his best advocate, if you can say such a thing, was Rommel, precisely a leader little inclined to such cautious temperament. Montgomery, he wrote, did well to renounce a strong counterattack to conquer back the southern sector because he probably would not have been able to do so. Instead, by leaving the artillery and aviation to act, he was able to inflict damage on the mass of the manoeuvre of the AIT that was certainly superior to his losses and preserve the power of the 8th Army intact.

The setback was felt by the Commands of the major formations and by the Axis troops. At the higher levels, the reactions proved different. Kesselring, for example, admitted that the disappointing result *"was for me a warning that indicated the shipwreck of the entire African campaign"*[113].

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[110] F. VON MELLENTHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 177.
[111] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs*, p. 110.
[112] M. CARVER, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
[113] A. KESSELRING, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Yet in those days he did not show this uneasiness to Cavallero. Rather, he pointed to the desirable eventuality of an attack following which it would be possible *"to pass to a counterattack and then to the offensive. It is possible that we shall have to make an offensive without being 100% ready, because political-military reasons may advise doing so"*[114].

Cavallero saw the event and its causes from a particular and, to tell the truth, rather distorted perspective:

> "Marshal Rommel has communicated having suspended the action because supplies arrive inconsistently and, apart from this fact, he lacked the surprise having arrived at a line prefixed by him in the evening of the 31st rather than the morning. Furthermore, German aviation did not give him the output that he had expected. It is evident for the third time that there is dissension between him and Marshal Kesselring"[115].

In any case, in the following days reality was held before Rommel without room for misinterpretation. The first to speak was Mancinelli, who on the 5th addressed a very explicit telegram to the Supreme Command about the situation at the moment and in the immediate future:

> "Judgement of situation at AIT Headquarters. I have not yet spoken to Rommel in these regards, but I do not - I repeat, *do not* - doubt agreeing completely. Favourable opportunity for rapid conquest of Egypt definitely missed. Preparation of new operation will require at least three months, given that sufficient forces, vehicles, logistic reserves are sent. In fact 22nd German Division will only begin transfer at the end of current month and will take (...?...) a month at the pace of the 164th.
> The eventual British attack, on the other hand, is considered with absolute optimism, which could unblock the current situation in our favour. Such an eventuality is considered unlikely, because in the current general circumstances difficulties with the Alamein position represent a more economical solution for the British. Naturally, the examined circumstances, which are contained in the local theatre of operations, could be influenced and even totally changed by Caucasus developments.

[114] Cavallero's diary, dated 7/9/1942.
[115] *Ibid.*, dated 4/9/1942.

Rommel would come (...) to Europe for a period of rest"[116].

Then it was Barbasetti's turn. Received by Rommel on the 7th, he rushed to report the essential points of the meeting to Rome. It dealt with the German Marshal's version of the recent events: the offensive did not achieve the hoped-for success above all because the enemy was waiting for it, thanks to information from prisoners; the field of manoeuvre, intersected by vast minefields and areas with difficult road conditions had heavily slowed the development of the plan; from the second day on, the fuel crisis appeared to be very serious; finally, the British aviation had raged with uninterrupted "*hellish*" bombings. The AIT honourably extracted itself from that crisis in virtue of a "*wise retreat to suitable positions*" and Rommel learned two important lessons from the events; the absolute inappropriateness of taking up an offensive without the guarantee of supplies; the impossibility of confronting the adversary with too marked a difference in aviation, tanks and artillery. "*I had already pointed out that, in the situation we were in, long range operations could not be conducted*", Rommel added, though without going into detail. In conclusion, the offensive in the southern sector of the front no longer appeared conjecturable, considering the extent of the minefields, not to mention the material superiority of the 8th Army and the *Desert Air Force*. At the moment, the only stance to take was that of exploiting the British minefields for defensive purposes but, in order to remain on the El Alamein line, "*which now represents the definitive line in Africa*", it would also be necessary to employ part of the mobile troops in a forward position. Once all the motorized corps had been gathered to the rear, forming the mass of the manoeuvre, and the X and XX Corps had been further reinforced, then the El Alamein positions would be unshakeable in their defensive stance.

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[116] Historical diary of *Delease* (DSD), telegram 4094, dated 5/9/1942, 12:00 hours, by Gen. Mancinelli. The message was addressed to the Supreme Command and for the knowledge of *Delease*. Immediately, Barbasetti intervened inviting Mancinelli to abstain from initiatives of the sort in the future and to come to him first *"because, among other things, I might have other elements that actually conflict with the ones that you gather"* (DSD, telegram 1373/Sit. dated 5/9/1942, 21:50 hours).

Naturally, Mancinelli rebutted in a lively way highlighting that he had limited himself to pointing out Rommel's thinking in good faith, and concluding that it would have been mortifying for him that the Marshal's thinking could be better and more exactly known at a distance of 500 kilometres from the front than from him, who lived the days of battle next to the Marshal (G. MANCINELLI, *op. cit.*, p. 165).

As for Cavallero, about ten days later he had his pleasure expressed to Mancinelli for "*the news, predictions and appraisals*" provided in the recent operational period, not to mention the confirmation of continuing the relationship of correspondence with the Supreme Command "*on which you directly depend*" (DSCS, ph. 32444/Op. dated 15/9/1942).

As for the British, Rommel continued, it was necessary to predict their frontal attack and actions behind the lines by paratrooper and commando units.

To resume the offensive the AIT needed one or two German divisions and as many Italian ones (the *Pistoia* could stay to guard behind the lines, but the *Pavia* had to return in line), and an increase in aviation. Moreover it was necessary, and Barbasetti had assured his involvement in this regard, to build a line of communications immediately behind the positions, give the *Folgore* a greater number of anti-tank guns and increase the already satisfying potential of the Tobruk railway.

This was the essence of the meeting, but Barbasetti did not omit some personal comment:

> "a. To me the marshal appeared full of disappointment for the events, almost wanting approval. He asked my opinion more than once. And in the end he added that it was his intention, as soon as the defensive front had been consolidated, to go to Rome and Berlin to speak *personally* with the Duce and the Führer and *personally* report to them on the situation and the facts.
> b. The narration of the reasons for the abandonment of the offensive appeared uncertain at times, at times reticent, at times conflicting, especially in the category of the priority order of the various causes. The Marshal fell into contradiction in describing his stance and his decisions;
> c. A rumour has spread, confirmed by a lot of reliable evidence, that a conflict of opinion and consequent new personal dissension, not always hidden, was born between Rommel and Kesselring before *or* during (or before *and* during) the operations;
> d. In truth, German aviation was meagre (in the number of aircraft actually available), while the Italian, which was superior to the availability of the previous May, was not fully exploited by the German Command, almost as though Rommel did not want to go to rely heavily on aviation, which he considered to be Kesselring's realm;
> e. General Nehring, wounded by air bombing, commander of the German armoured army corps, and therefore well aware of Rommel's true thoughts, said that the German Command had no intention of unleashing a large offensive, but rather conducting raids in forces that, if successful, would have reached large numbers;
> f. At the XXI and X Army Corps, that is, those only engaged in demonstrative actions, at the forward part of the 5th Air Squadron and some elements near Rommel himself [evident reference to Mancinelli], com-

plete explanations were not given about the reasons for the retreat; the aforementioned large units do not have, however, elements close enough to judge as the XX Army Corps had, which was not able to achieve the movements ordered in the established time.
It is certain that the suspension of the offensive, expected and wanted by the bulk of the troops, whatever the reasons may have been, constituted a disappointment for the troops themselves (...)"[117].

At this point, the picture is complete. Rommel, aware of his inferiority and above all insecure about supplies, reluctantly began the operation not expecting huge objectives but ready to take full advantage of any opportunity. Having ascertained the failure of the move, he preferred not to insist on what was at that point becoming a reckless undertaking. The first two lines of a report that the liaison officer from the *Delease* information office at AIT Headquarters sent to his office chief are symptomatic: "*At the end of action, Rommel returned to his [tactical] command post in an excellent mood and as if he had been freed of a tormenting thought* (...)"[118].

Cavallero was fully aware of the facts, but nevertheless wanted to comment on the operational plan that he himself could not believe in. He outlined the situation in Egypt to General von Thoma, on his way to Rome to take over the DAK Command from Nehring, "*and I emphasize that, if we had had one brigade more in the recent action, we would have arrived in Cairo. However, I have full faith in a future victorious advance!*"[119].

[117] DSD, ph. SD/37 dated 8/9/1942 from Barbasetti to Cavallero.
[118] DSD, Personal memorandum for the Chief of Intelligence Office dated 8/9/1942.
[119] Cavallero's diary, dated 11/9/1942.

Necropoli Militare Italiana di QUOTA 33 (ALAMEIN, Egitto)
Progettata e costruita dal 1949 al 1957 dal Capo Delegazione Onoranze Caduti ing. Paolo' Caccia Dominioni ++++++++++++

ISBN 88-87940-79-7

€ 22,00